俺の死亡フラグが留まるところを知らない

ORE no SHIBOU FLAG ga
Todomaru tokoro wo Shiranai

著 泉 Izumi
Illustration Aちき

宝島社

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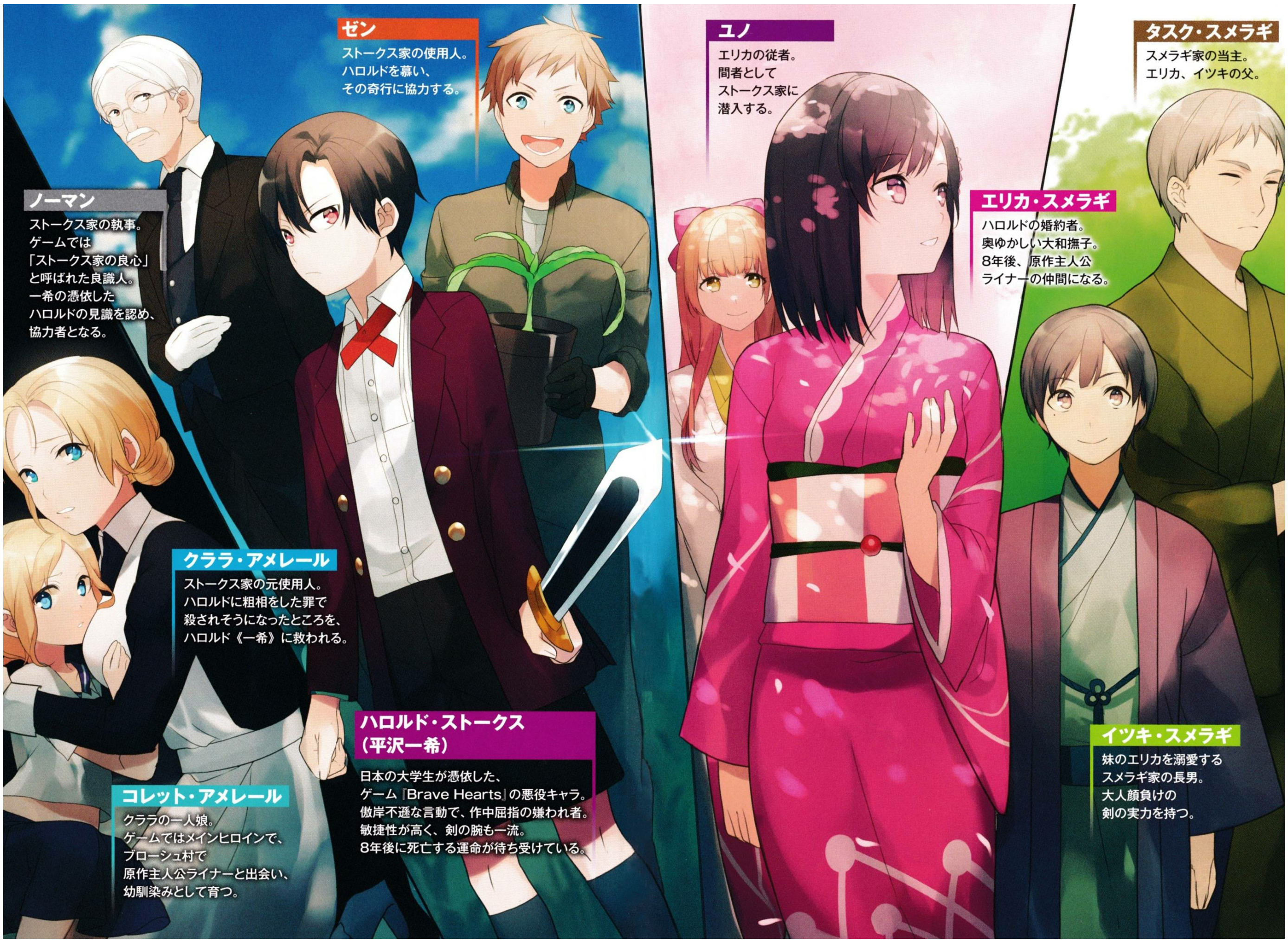
LN Volume 1 Illustrations



ノーマン
ストークス家の執事。
ゲームでは
「ストークス家の良心」
と呼ばれた良識人。
一希の憑依した
ハロルドの見識を認め、
協力者となる。

クララ・アメレール
ストークス家の元使用人。
ハロルドに粗相をした罪で
殺されそうになったところを、
ハロルド《一希》に救われる。

コレット・アメレール
クララの一人娘。
ゲームではメインヒロインで、
ブローシュ村で
原作主人公ライナーと出会い、
幼馴染みとして育つ。

ゼン
ストークス家の使用人。
ハロルドを慕い、
その奇行に協力する。

ハロルド・ストークス
（平沢一希）
日本の大学生が憑依した、
ゲーム『Brave Hearts』の悪役キャラ。
傲岸不遜な言動で、作中屈指の嫌われ者。
敏捷性が高く、剣の腕も一流。
8年後に死亡する運命が待ち受けている。

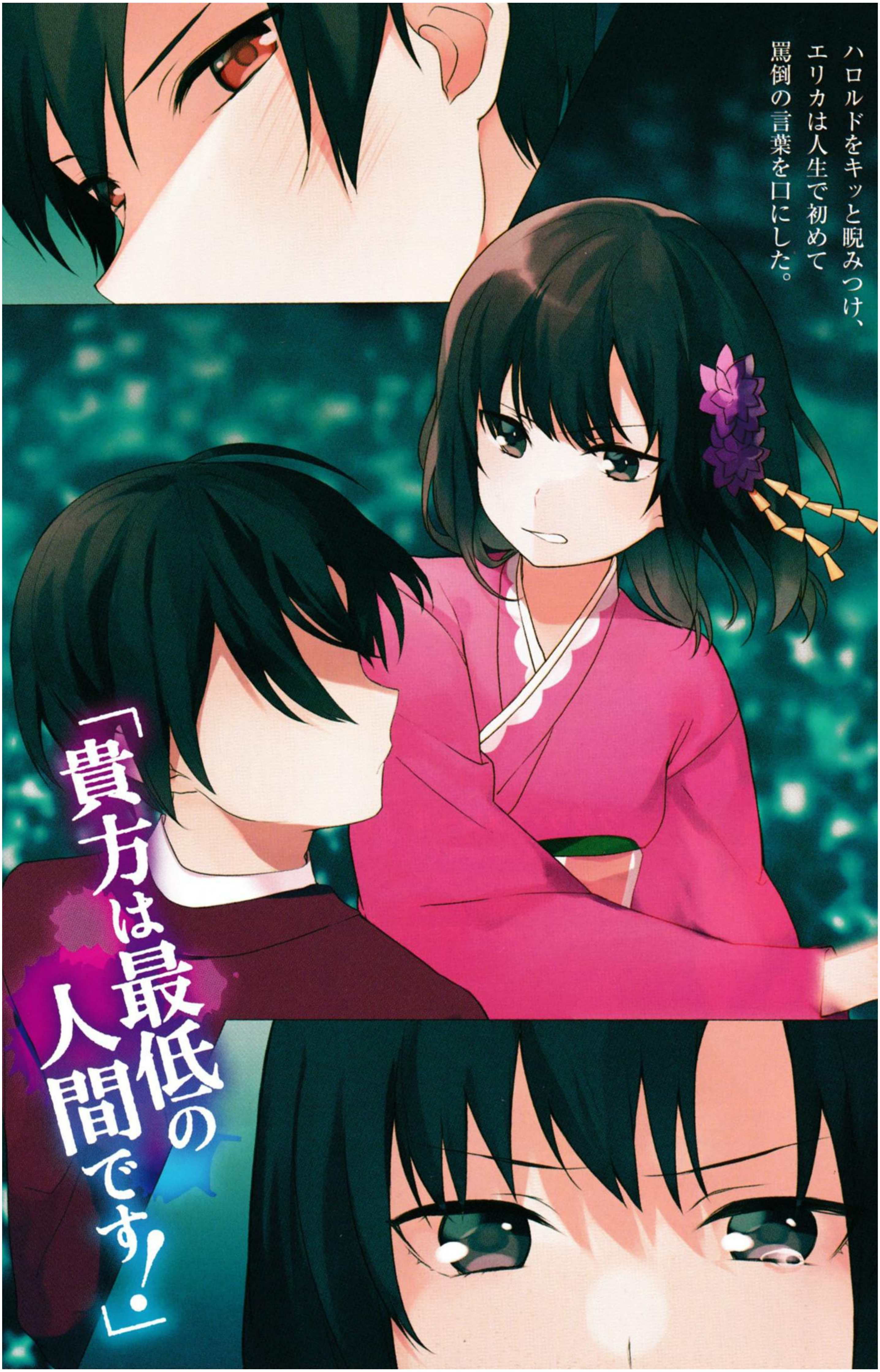
ユノ
エリカの従者。
間者として
ストークス家に
潜入する。

エリカ・スメラギ
ハロルドの婚約者。
奥ゆかしい大和撫子。
8年後、原作主人公
ライナーの仲間になる。

タスク・スメラギ
スメラギ家の当主。
エリカ、イツキの父。

イツキ・スメラギ
妹のエリカを溺愛する
スメラギ家の長男。
大人顔負けの
剣の実力を持つ。

From left to right –
Colette, Clara, Norman, Harold, Zen, Juno, Erika, Itsuki and Tasuku



ハロルドをキッと睨みつけ、エリカは人生で初めて罵倒の言葉を口にした。

「貴方は最低の人間です！」

お手にとって頂き
ありがとうございました。

Aちき

Episode 1

(Gashan)
A high-pitched noise reverberated indoors.
The noise, which would make one close their ears with both their hands reflexively, was produced by a man, who seemed to be in his mid 30’s, growing a Kaiser beard, holding a staff which shined with a black lustre, and donning a high-collared military uniform. He had smashed a huge vase, which was about 1 meter tall, with the staff grasped in his right hand.
White petals fluttered down, as the leaking water spread onto a deep crimson carpet.

「How will you take responsibility for this!?」

「I am extremely sorry! Please forgive me……!」

「Don’t screw around, you inferior woman!」

The man’s face was dyed with anger. The phrase, demonic expression, indicated his facial features perfectly in the current situation.
Like a raging fire, in his anger, which was as though it couldn’t be satisfied by merely smashing a vase, he was using foul language to abuse the servant in front of him, who was on her knees, bowing her head down and offering words of apology while crying.

There was also the appearance of a young woman, wearing a resplendent dress, hugging a young boy and looking at the servant with scorn in her eyes, next to the man. At a glance, it seemed as though the man in the military uniform and the woman in the dress were verbally assaulting a lone servant.
Comprehending the current state of affairs, Hirasawa Kazuki came to the following conclusion.

(……Maybe, this is a game event?)

It might seem like a flustered and crazy conclusion, but there was a reason this conclusion was reached – Kazuki recognized this figure and this scene.
Presently, the sequence of arguments unfolding in front of him bore a resemblance to a scene in the single-player RPG –『Brave Hearts』, which was up

for sale a few years ago.

He was able to recall it instantly because he was a fan of the game, and no other reason. Even the fingers on both hands weren't enough to count the number of times he had completely played the game.
There was no mistake, since the dialog of the characters in each event scene was more-or-less memorized.

The man in the military uniform and the woman in the dress were the parents of a character appearing in the game, and the servant begging for forgiveness while crying was the mother of the main character of the game.

Grasping the circumstances up until there, Kazuki, who was being hugged by the woman in the dress from some time, falls into a state of extreme confusion and comes to a standstill.
Why are the characters of a game moving; in the first place, is this reality; is something happening to my body.

His thoughts were racing with each emerging question.
Abruptly being dropped into this scene of fighting, to which his comprehension couldn't catch up, a single thing was clear.

(I'll be troubled if I'm thrown into such a depressing event all of a sudden though!?)

For argument's sake, if the current scene were to trace the scenario of the game, then the servant, Clara's, life was in an extremely precarious situation.
Based on Kazuki's thoughts, it could be guessed that this is an event where the servant is killed. Clara's life is taken by the hands of Harold, the son of the man in the military uniform.

(Where is Harold, the vital character? If I'm not mistaken, in this scene, his anxious mother is………eh, no way)

And then, Kazuki realizes a fact which comes as a huge blow – That his current position is the same as Harold's.
A certain uncomfortable feeling rose up like a link. It was a concern about the height of his field of view.
Even though he was firmly standing on both his legs, his field of view was considerably lower.

This event scene is shown as a reflection of the past in the story. His exact age was unknown, but at that occasion, Harold was a boy of about 10 years old. Various factors displayed an unpleasant coincidence.

(Perhaps, I have become Harold……?)

That was a preposterous thought that hit him. It wasn't as though there was any proof. But the instant that possibility went across his head, severe chills ran down his spine.

(No no, what am I saying. This is a dream, if I think about it normally.)

As though to shake off an unpleasant premonition, he persuades himself. That is the most acceptable answer according to common sense.

No matter how desperately his reasoning claims that this is a dream, the warmth transmitted from being hugged, the angry voice striking his ears, carrying a sense of reality, screams at Kazuki's five senses. No matter how much he denies it, in no way could it be thought of as a dream.

(Well then, since I know that this isn't a dream, as expected, is this the game world? There's no way………but this feeling of reality, can only be thought of as……..but still, the world of the game…….if thought of like that, then isn't Clara-san going to die!?)

Being torn between the conflicting thoughts of his reasoning and instinct, Kazuki could only act like an idiot. He wanted to stop thinking, since his thoughts were repeatedly going around in circles.

As though it was cut off from his will, his body moved in contrast with his thoughts. Shaking off his mother's arm, his legs advance, step-by-step.

「There is no merit in lending ears to you begging for your life. That corrupt blood, I will personally purge it. 」

「Father, wait. Entrust the execution of this woman to me」

The man had taken the sword which was hung on the wall, ready to cut down the servant. From behind him, Harold spoke words of restraint.

Kazuki was familiar with those words as he had seen them on-screen.
He spoke the dialog which wasn't voiced out in the game originally, in the voice

of Harold, which he had gotten used to. Intervening at that point wasn't entirely only his intention.

「To you? What do you plan to do?」

「Recently, I learned a new magic. Let her become a guinea pig for testing that. Instead of dirtying the room with the blood of an inferior species like this, isn't that a better use?」

He found out that the corners of his lips rose up. Contrary to Kazuki's feelings, a villainous smile floated up.
It goes even without saying, but Kazuki didn't even have the slightest bit of complacency to express the smile. On top of being placed in an incomprehensible situation, his body overturning his will and taking action on its own was an unendurable terror for him.

Kazuki hadn't piled up an abundance of life experience to think fast in such a situation. A person who can adapt to and deal with such a situation, surpasses what can be called as calm or skillful and can only be called as a freak. Fortunately or unfortunately, Kazuki wasn't a freak.

But if viewed from another angle, this meant that the flow of this event was irreversible.

「Hohou, that might also be amusing. Until then, throw this woman in the dungeon!」

As soon as Military Uniform raises his voice, immediately a soldier arrives and drags Clara away by grabbing her hand. Kazuki could only see off her retreating figure off.

「Filthy mixed-blood. Even though she was hired after I took pity on her, when asked to do something, she can't do even a single thing properly.」

「After all, she is an inferior species. Harold wants to test his magic, so she might be useful.」

「Humph, that is also true.」

As though looking at an object which was filthy, their eyes had no intention of hiding their disgust. This married couple didn't even perceive the servant, Clara,

as a human being.
Under normal circumstances, towards this, Kazuki would have expressed his discomfort.

However, since his outlook had contracted due to the chaos, the married couple's speech and conduct didn't reach his ears. Even if it had reached him, he wouldn't have properly perceived the contents.

He had fallen into a stupor for several minutes. Let alone his surroundings, since then, what kind of conversations he exchanged with whom, how he reached this location, not a single thing did he have a recollection of.
When he finally came to his senses, Kazuki was in a room, of which he had no memories, resting deeply on a single person sofa, with his gaze wandering about in empty space.

「……Where is this? Is this Harold's room?」

While muttering with a powerless voice, without an aim, he looked around inside the room with swimming eyes.
Since it doesn't appear during the course of the game, its accurate parts aren't known, but from the feeling he got from looking at the width of the room, the canopied bed, the sofa he was resting on, he could guess as to whom this room belonged to.

In a corner of the room, there was a full-length mirror whose height was greater than a grown male's. Kazuki swallowed his saliva, with a sharp sound resounding from his throat.

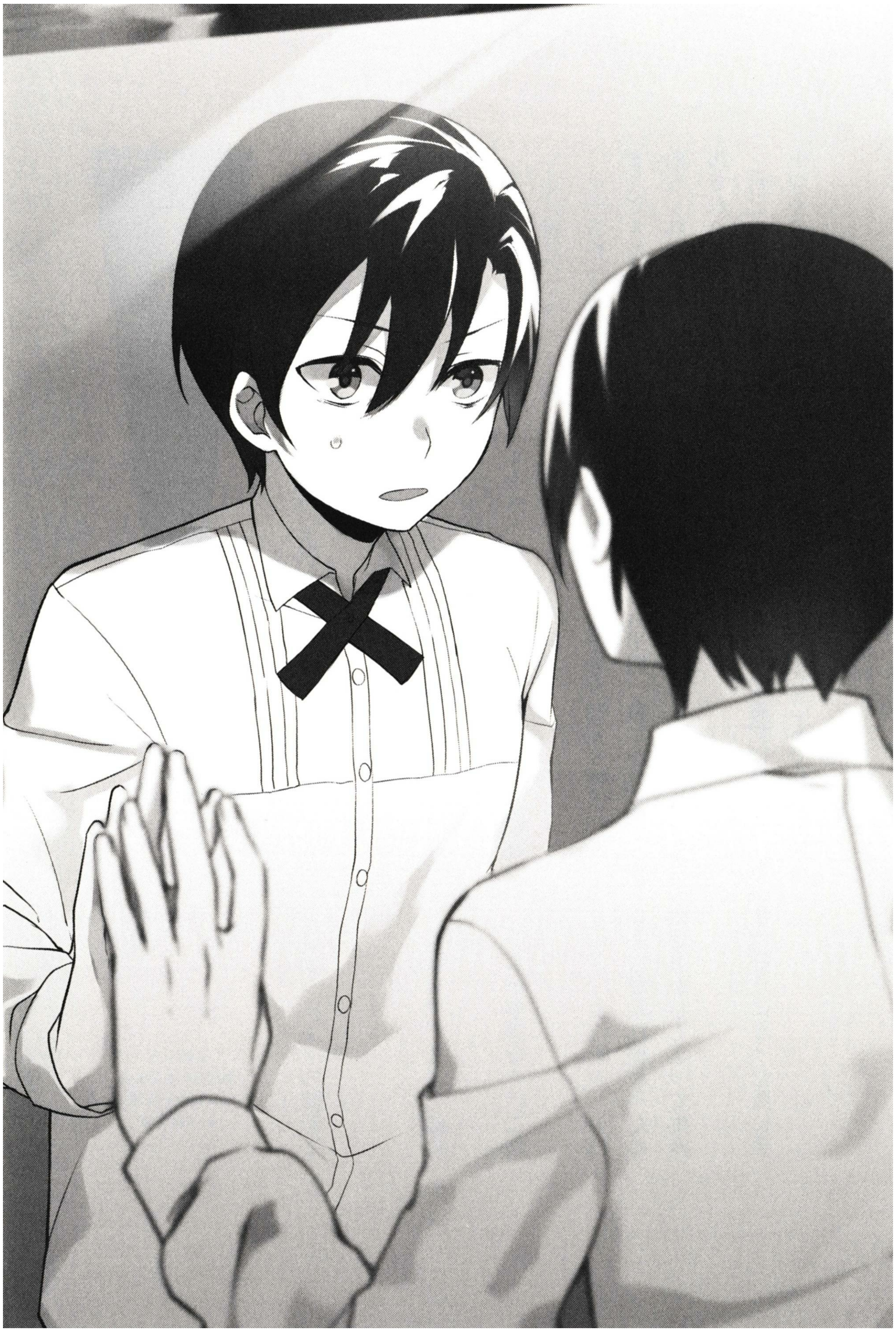
Standing up after putting all his power into his trembling knees, he walked towards the full-length mirror with unsteady footsteps.
To confirm his hypothesis. While praying that his hypothesis was off.

As he gets closer step-by-step, his heartbeat increased violently and his breathing also became fast and shallow. And yet, Kazuki didn't stop his footsteps.
And finally, he stood in front of the full-length mirror. He slowly raised his face, from a position where his head was bent low where he could only see the tips of his foot.
Facing the full-length mirror, he opened his tightly shut eyelids. The person who

was reflected from its surface, was without a doubt——

「It’s a lie, right…….」

Ruthlessly depicted, was the figure of Harold with the appearance of a young boy.



Episode 2

Glossy black hair and red pupils. Even if he didn't want to, he could feel that Harold's face had the features found on people outside Japan and even far away from Asia.
Roughly 140 cm in height and as expected, aged approximately 10 years.

Dressed in a pure white shirt with a cross-tie and knee-high half-pants, he had the appearance which was exactly like a painting of a young boy coming from a distinguished and noble family.

Hirasawa Kazuki had become Harold Stokes. It seemed hard to accept, but with this, he had practically confirmed that this was the truth.

Neither the reasoning nor the process was understood. Well then, should this situation be gathered as possessing a person or should it be fine with viewing it as a frighteningly real dream. Or maybe, Hirasawa Kazuki had switched places with Harold Stokes, or it might also be that the consciousness of Hirasawa Kazuki had been birthed by the delusions of the owner of this body that had gone crazy.

The loss of a factor to verify one's self. Attacked by a feeling of as though loosing all the support from his feet, at the same time as he put his hands on his knees, which had lost almost all their strength, he held back the sense of nausea which was welling up.
His breathing was agonizing and his visibility was dyed white due to vertigo, while his gastric juices rampaged around in the opposite direction.
In any case, it was an awful feeling.

Shall I throw away everything as it is and just sleep – With such irresponsible feelings, Kazuki collapsed onto the bed. He didn't have any willpower left to work out his thoughts.
Waking up after sleeping and telling「It was all a dream, I was seriously flustered」- muttering that, he wipes off his cold sweat. Clinging onto that hope, as his consciousness was drifting off, it was pulled back into his body due to the knocking sounds on the door.

「……Come in」

The thought of feigning ignorance passed through his mind.
But before he could think deeply about it, he gave out a reply.
It wasn't clear whether it was Harold's will or Kazuki's subconsciousness.

(Ah, but I wouldn't abruptly tell them to「Come in」)

Without even knowing who it was, talking in such a rude manner, Kazuki wasn't a person who didn't know about courtesy. If that is the case, like before, did his body move on its own?
Since he had already replied, without a choice, he raised his languid body up while thinking such thoughts, which put him in an even more depressing mood.

While that may be true, it wasn't as though the visitor would refrain from entering into the room. A man with greying hair opened the door, bowed respectfully and stepped inside the room.
Looking at his face, Kazuki realized who the other person was.

Norman.
He, who serves as a butler in this estate, given the nickname-『Conscience of the Stokes house』by the players, is a character affectionately called as「Norman-san」. Since he was just a butler and not a blood-relative, he wasn't a member of the Stokes family.

Anyway, he, who becomes a refreshing agent to the heart in the event related to the highly ranked and valued Stokes house, stepped into Kazuki's (Harold's) room.

「Excuse my rudeness」

「What business do you have?」

「To be honest, I want to consult Harold-sama about…….」

Norman's words trailed off at the middle of his sentence.
Feeling suspicious, Kazuki intently watched Norman's face. When he did that, the words which followed, bewildered him.

「Perhaps, are you feeling unwell? Then…….」

「There's no problem」

「But your complexion is——」

「I’m telling you that there’s no problem」

Without even an ounce of consideration, he cut off Norman’s words filled with concern and discarded them.
Honestly, there were all kinds of problems, but it wasn’t as though he could straightforwardly convey – 「Actually, it seems like I have possessed Harold-kun」. And so, when he mildly wanted to refuse, it became like this. It seemed as though this mouth automatically translated words into Harold’s style. Was the previous 「Come in」 also the work of this mouth. If that was the case, what an annoying feature this was.

In response to Harold’s blunt reaction, Norman felt that something was out of place.
The young Harold that he was aware of had extreme hatred towards holding back, and would never work hard, would run away from pain, and would eliminate everything he disliked.

His parents were also largely responsible for generally approving something like that, that is to say, if Harold was feeling unwell, instead of enduring it like this, he would have exaggeratedly cried out about his condition.
However, only on this day alone, did he not do this, urging to continue the conversation, even though his face was extremely pallid.

He thought about speaking at a later time, but looking at Harold’s eyes which were screaming – 「Hurry up and speak」, Norman continued the conversation.

「…….Then, I’ll be brief. I am requesting for reduction of the punishment imposed on Clara」

When he heard that, Kazuki remembered. The reality that the current him holds the life of a person.
The shock of realizing that he had become Harold was too big, due to which his memory had lapsed completely.

His mouth had spouted out the dialog of the event, where he makes the servant as the test subject for his new magic, on its own, and naturally, Kazuki had no intentions of doing that.
That being the case, as he was about to instantly consent to Norman’s request, he wasn’t even able to form them into words.

It wasn't as though Harold's will obstructed him. It was that Kazuki himself, swallowed down the words.
This was because he had to answer according to the situation, since he had knowledge about the original work.

If the situation followed the original work, then the servant, Clara, would be burned to death by Harold's magic. As a result, the woman's daughter, Colette, would be driven out of the Stokes' territory, since she would have no relatives. Before long , Colette, who would have collapsed due to the exhaustion of both mind and body, would then be sheltered, and would start to live with the original work's protagonist and his family, under the same roof.

In short, Colette was the main heroine and if Clara was saved now, she wouldn't encounter the protagonist, which would be a huge deviation from the story. Kazuki realized this and was at a loss for words.

In the end, this was just a possibility.
There was a possibility that even if Clara was either saved or killed, Colette might encounter the protagonist and become his friend.
The phenomenon which could be called as the power to alter history.
If this power worked even if Kazuki moved as he pleased, then for better or for worse, there was no need for him to worry.

(If that is true, then the events of the original work can't be avoided and my future would be pitch black. Let me assume that a power like that doesn't exist)

If he hadn't done that, Kazuki's mental health would have taken a hit.
Conversely, if a thing like the altering power doesn't operate, using the knowledge about the original work, Kazuki could avoid the messed up actions taken by Harold, and it wouldn't be extremely difficult to behave in a way that wouldn't lower his impression.
A ray of hope rose up in Kazuki's heart.

(For that purpose, if I take actions which deviate too much from the original work, I would lose an advantage, which would be a poor plan. Without changing the scenario in a broad sense, if I could guide only the conclusion to a decent direction, then……..!)

As it was, if he didn't take any actions and the scenario progressed completely

in accordance with the original work, in a few more years, Kazuki would welcome death. He must do everything he can to avoid that.
However, what kind of influence the destruction of the original story causes, wasn't known. Much less, in an RPG world, where death was ever closer. In a world like this, knowing the rough flow of the future was the greatest advantage, and if this was ignored, death might come due to a development absent in the original work.

A colossal death flag called the world of survival of the fittest. To take on both those parties and survive, the flow of the original work must be drawn while it would be fine to move forward by breaking down his own flag.
Anyway, Kazuki strengthened his resolve to do all he could before he could start talking pretentiously, if he didn't want to die.
Norman was startled by seeing Kazuki's eyes, which were harboring such a stubborn determination. This was because, he had never seen the boy making such eyes previously.

「Clara is that servant, right? Bastard, are you telling me to act for the sake of rescuing her.」

Kazuki instantly regretted the opening of his mouth.
As for Kazuki, his intention was to tell – 「Clara-san was the servant from some time ago, right? I really want to save her but, I cannot move openly」. How freely was that translated for the remark to be like this.

Naturally, as though he was dispirited, Norman's expression became clouded.

(This is bad!)

Kazuki felt through his body that the flow had become extremely bad. The way things were going, his Hate Points was going to increase from the already existing amount.
Somehow trying to gloss over things, he frantically squeezed out words.

「If you want to help, to start with, move on your own. I will listen to your words after that」

「In, in that case……..!」

「Importunate. Get out immediately」

Kazuki, flustered by his own mouth spouting out abusive language more than what was expected, made Norman leave, by driving him out mid-sentence. Seeing him leave while expressing gratitude even after such treatment, Kazuki was relieved that his will to somewhat co-operate was conveyed.

Throwing himself down on the bed, looking up this time, Kazuki started to reflect deeply on his careless thinking.
He cannot avoid taking back his previous opinion already. As long as this mouth was there, it seemed that it would be a considerably difficult problem to alter only the conclusion of the event without lowering his impression.

While that may be true, he couldn't just tell –「As expected, shall I give up」. If the worst situation was to be assumed, the situation where death in this world would, without a doubt, be the death of Hirasawa Kazuki, which would be extremely troublesome. There might also be a possibility of returning back to his original world by dying here, but the risk was too high for him to put it into action.

And so, until the clue to escape the current situation was caught, the best way to survive as Harold Stokes was to act in accordance with the original work and avoid taking screwed up actions.
In that way, with a situation close to the original work's, if the flow of this world was continued to be observed closely, it would become clear whether this place was the same world of『Brave Hearts』or a world which was a counterfeit of it.

And so, what was it that Kazuki ought to do now. It was to gather information, to get a good grasp on the present situation.

Kazuki, who had recovered his energy to a certain extent due to the discovery of hope, got off the bed and started rummaging through the drawers and searching the bookshelf. When he did that, other than general goods he also found some items which had appeared in the game.
Nearly everything stowed on the bookshelf were books related to magic or biographies which contained lots of illustrations. Fortunately, the books were written in Japanese, which could be read even by Kazuki.
As expected, it might be a world of made・in・Japan.

After briefly finishing his search, he went out of the room. In order to talk with

Clara.
He calls out to an armored soldier who was nearby.

「Oi, bastard」

「Ha Ha!」

The soldier bent down on one knee and lowered his head.
By the way, he stopped minding about the use of his language in each and every single situation.

「Lead me to the dungeon where the servant called Clara is imprisoned」

「To the dungeon?」

「What? If you have any objections, I'll listen to them」

「No, I don't! This way please!」

With brisk movements, the soldier took the lead. The armor was clattering noisily. It looked like it would be an annoyance if he wandered around in the mansion during night.

He followed behind the soldier like that for a short while.
They arrived in front of a desolate looking building with a height of 3m, made out of stone, situated behind the mansion.

「This is the dungeon」

「How many people are imprisoned?」

「For now, it should be a single person, but…….. 」

If it was like that, it seemed that the only one inside was Clara. For Kazuki, this was convenient.

「You remain here and keep a lookout so that no one comes inside」

「Ce, certainly」

Making the soldier stand outside, only Kazuki entered inside the building after opening the wooden door.

「Ha, Harold-sama!? Uo!」

In the narrow room, which had the appearance of a guardroom, there was the form of yet another soldier. Lying down upon the chair which was lined up, was the posture of the soldier indicating his blatant idling.

　The soldier, hurriedly trying to rise up, tripped and fell down from the chair. Kazuki ignored that and extended his hand to an iron grill, furnished on the ground in the left-hand corner of the room, which appeared to lead to the dungeon. When he pulled it, he found that it was locked tightly.

　「Hand over the key」

　「Ye, yes!」

　The soldier handed over a key to Harold, from the ones hung on the wall. He inserted the key into the keyhole and when he turned it to the left side, the lock opened with a loud clank.

　「I have to talk with the person in the dungeon. Don't you dare enter」

　Nailing down that point, he descended the stairway leading to the dungeon while he still held the key, so that he wouldn't get locked in, even if by chance. The stairway was gloomy and even the steps couldn't be seen properly. He finally reached the prison after carefully descending the 10 odd steps.

　The prison had a total of 4 cells, 2 on each side. Each cell only had something which seemed like a bed made only out of straw and a simple toilet out in the open. On the wall at the other side of the prison was a small window, with a height of 20 cm and a width of 30 cm, through which a small amount of light was illuminating the prison.

　Kazuki stopped his feet in front of the cell situated at the interior right hand side, in which Clara was imprisoned.

　「There is no mistake that you are Clara Emerel , right?」

　「Harold-sama……?」

　Kazuki stood in front of Clara's cell in a position where she could not make out his facial features.
It was at the level where she could only guess at who it was from looking at the small silhouette of the person and listening to the voice of the person.

　However, a doubt rose up in her mind.

A doubt about why he came here.

「Perhaps……….Has that time already come?」

Her voice shook.
A test subject for experimenting a new magic. The boy standing in front of her had definitely told that some time ago.
Thinking that the time had already come, Clara's face was etched with an even more deeper color of despair.

But the reply from Harold was something which greatly deviated from her prediction.

「If that is your wish, then I will do so. But currently, it's for a different matter.」

Harold folded his arms and leaned his back on the iron bars of the opposite cell.
She thought about what he meant by a different matter. She had already worked in this mansion for almost 2 years and the amount of times she had directly conversed with Harold was uncountable, but still, she tilted her head in confusion.

「A different matter, is it?」

「Just confirmation. You only need to answer my questions without any lies or deception」

「……..Okay, I will answer all the questions you ask me」

The vigor with which Clara could show agreement, was only by nodding. It was completely different from how he normally behaved, where he always wanted to have his own way. She was swallowed by the atmosphere given off by Harold, who was emitting a calm and composed aura and was unbecoming of his age.

「What is the composition of your family?」

「I have a single daughter」

「What is her name?」

「She is called Colette」

「What about blood relatives or close family members other than her?」

「I left my hometown with my husband, which was similar to running away, and from then on it was a state of isolation from my house. 3 years ago, due to a disease, my husband……..」

(So there was reason like that for Colette not having a relative other than her mother)

The purpose of the questioning was for comparing and adjusting the knowledge of the original work.
Clara was getting baffled by listening to him asking questions about her circumstances which had nothing to do with her punishment, but Kazuki paid no heed to that and persistently continued to interrogate her.

「The age of your daughter is?」

「She becomes 9 this year」

「Do you have any experience in martial arts or using any magic?」

「No, things like that in particular……..」

The time it took was a few minutes. Kazuki indifferently repeated the questions. The outcome was rather good.
All the information obtained from Clara was consistent with Kazuki's. With this, all the information that could be obtained at this stage was present and he was able to decide on what to do hereafter.

「That's it. Well then」

「Wait for a moment please」

Clara pleaded for Kazuki, who was about to leave, to halt.

「……..What?」

「If I die, then my daughter………Colette will be all alone. At that age, she wouldn't even be able to survive if she is left alone……..」

Clara tells that while shedding tears.

「Therefore, after my death, please take care of my daughter! That girl has done no wrong. Please, please I beg you…….! 」

Instead of worrying about her own life, she, who was anxious about the future

of her child, begged while grovelling and bowing her head, to the one whom she should hate to the core, who was similar to a person falsely accusing her.
If it was the real Harold, he might have ridiculed and laughed at that appearance.

But Kazuki was different. He could currently sense the unconditional love from a mother to a daughter, from Clara.
Kazuki couldn’t laugh at the mother who was begging for the happiness of her daughter, instead of worrying about her own life. He now held the conviction that she was an existence that was absolutely indispensable for Colette.
The likes of killing such a person was improbable.

「Unsightly. That appearance and also the utter stupidity of being seized by needless and meaningless anxiety」

For Harold, this seemed to be consoling words. Up to what extent does his haughty attitude go.

「That is, what do you mean by………..」

Without answering Clara’s question, Kazuki starts to walk away. If he were to stay in front of her any more than this, it seemed as though he would start crying out of sympathy. Turning his back on her, Kazuki briefly told her –

「If you love her to that extent, never again let go of her」

Before long, the sound of footsteps also vanished and the sound of the iron grill at the entrance being closed resounded out inside the dungeon.
Clara absentmindedly gazed at the darkness, through which Harold had disappeared, digesting the words he had left behind.

「This despair is needless anxiety, is it……..? Can I once again embrace Colette with these arms……..?」

There was no one to answer the murmur which leaked out from Clara and those words were swallowed up by the silence.
She didn’t know why, but she now felt as though the silence was tender.

|

Episode 3

Even though he had obtained important information, he was far from finding a solution to the problematic situation. There was a need to form a concrete plan to save Clara and Colette.
For now, Kazuki thought out that the 2 of them needed to leave the Stokes territory and shift their residence to the Brosch village, where the Liner family of the original work's protagonist lived.

The probability of Colette and Liner coming across each other would be the highest when Clara is still alive. As long as one had played the original work, they would know that the Brosch village was in no way large, and from the remarks of Liner in the game, they would also know that all the village children knew each other. The problem was whether Colette and Liner would develop a close relationship as in the game.

As long as Clara was still alive, it would be difficult to produce a situation where Colette would live together with the Liner family.
In that case, he was ruminating whether he could somehow or the other, place Colette in the childhood friends position.

Even though he was groaning 'Umumu….', no bright ideas came to mind. The one who appeared at such a time, where he was reaching his limits, was none other than Norman.

「Excuse me」

Kazuki, who saw Norman bowing down his head in the exact same manner he had done a few hours ago, thought – 'as expected, a well disciplined butler is different', and felt moved meaninglessly.
If there was something different form before, it was the bundle of sheets held in both his hands.

「Harold-sama, how are you feeling……….」

「How many times will you make me say it, there's no problem. And, what is that?」

「These are the map of the Stokes territory and its surroundings, and the information regarding the settlements in and around the neighborhood of the territory」

(Norman-san, efficiently done!)

He held back that shout of delight, which would destroy his character. Well, even if he had told something, it would be translated into something ominous like「Hou, a bit impetuous, aren't you」, which might not even seem like a compliment.

Nevertheless, it seemed as though, in just a few hours, Norman gathered up the huge amount of information. He decided to ignore asking him about what he did with the original work he was assigned.

「Well worked. Well then, how the hell do you plan to save that servant?」

「……..It is extremely difficult for me to say this but, I think that it would be ideal for her to migrate outside the territory of the Stokes house」

This was a huge wager for Norman.
Sending people out of the territory, this would reduce the manpower and also the revenue that could be collected from them. Harold was thinking that there was no need to mind it since, right from the start, he had no intention of killing her. Norman never thought that Harold was thinking like that.

He thought that Harold might feel unpleasant due to the manpower and revenue becoming the property of other nobles.
The thing called a noble's honor.

「Is that so. Where is the candidate town located?」

「Th, that is, here……….」

However, looking at Harold responding as though nothing had happened, Norman, who was partly vigilant, was letdown.
Harold was looking through the document brought by Norman, while listening to him. That attitude was seriousness itself.

In fact, being enthusiastic about Norman's proposal, he promptly started to think about a plan to deal with the point which appeared to be problematic.

「The things that need to be gathered to migrate outside the territory is numerous. In the first place, is it even possible to come and go out of the territory of the other nobles easily?」

「For individuals, there are no particular regulations. However, if we send her off without anything to an unknown land, the circumstances of her livelihood might be hard. I think that a minimum amount of materials are required……….」

If that was the case, there was a need to use a small, horse-drawn cart. Of course, a horse-drawn cart of the Stokes house.
And, for a cart belonging to a noble or a merchant to pass through, a transit permit was indispensable.

「With the goods, if the daughter is also added to that, the utilization of a cart cannot be avoided. Then, there is also a need to do something or the other regarding the transit permit………….really, there is nothing more problematic than this whole damn thing」

Contrary to his words, his eyes don't leave the document even for an instant. And, Norman was surprised to see that Harold had a grasp on the matters concerning Clara and her family, as though it was obvious. He had thought that normally, Harold was indifferent like his parents.

(Perhaps………..No, it must be so. Harold-sama, even at his age, must be thinking about the people)

Therefore, didn't he ask the one who had proposed to save her to tackle the situation personally?
If thought about it like that, everything fell into place.

Also, wasn't the bragging about using her as a test subject for his new magic, to hide her, who was about get slain, in a safe place for the time being.

Without showing disapproval at losing the almost nonexistent profit from the manpower and revenue of a single person, wasn't he seriously trying to save her without putting on airs.

While thinking about the future, Clara running away to a land where the Stokes house's power doesn't reach would be the safest for her. That being the case, rejecting that suggestion would be idiotic.

From the start, Kazuki was moving to save her. It was natural that he wanted to give it his all when he was unexpectedly requested for assistance in that matter.

Passionate feelings welled up in Norman's heart. And simultaneously, he felt ashamed at himself for being suspicious towards Harold.
He shouldn't be doubting the young boy, who was groping around for a solution to save a single servant in such an earnest manner.
If the boy himself was so serious, then he must also be serious. When he thought like that, his tone also naturally became passionate.

「In this town, in the following season, due to the harvest festival, they constantly require help………」

「Compared to the Stokes territory, the cost of living is high. If there is no environment where they gain a stable income……..」

Regarding his opinion, Harold precisely pointed out the problem, with the document as his basis. That thinking ability, outlook and knowledge weren't that of a 10 year old.
Inside the young boy's body was a university student, so it wasn't a mystery that he was able to do that, but Norman who didn't know that, couldn't help but think that he was a prodigy.

If he spoke about his feelings frankly, Norman didn't have even the slightest bit of agreeable sentiments concerning the Stokes house.
The current head of the family and his wife were the embodiment of the pure-blood principle and considered themselves to be the chosen ones. They looked down on anyone other than pure-blood nobles and didn't even think of the popualtion of their territory as people.

But he, who was the son of those 2 people, was different.
Without being seized by an easy-going prejudice, holding the moral values important as a human, he had a mindset comparable to adults.

This young boy, wasn't he the light of hope that would change the Stokes house. Harold was emitting a brilliance that wouldn't be there if he wasn't carrying such expectations.

「– That is all」

Eventually, the heated up discussion had ended after more than 2 hours had passed from the start of it. The sky, which could be seen from the window, was dyed in a red color.

From the exchange of his views with Norman, Kazuki also noticed some of the finer details, which he wasn’t aware of.
With that, the migration of those 2 to the Brosh village was mostly decided upon.

They hesitated on deciding the day on which they would carry out the plan. As he had played the original work, he didn’t feel that a large number of days had passed before Harold had killed Clara.
It seemed to be done on that very night at the shortest, 2 days later at the longest.

If there were no drastic delays, it wouldn’t affect the flow of original work, but with respect to taking insurance, the plan had to be carried out within 3 days, including today. This was also to avoid a situation where his parents would doubt him if he were to be too impatient. Nevertheless, it would be unrealistic to implement the plan today, at this time. Then it would have to either be the next day or the day after.

「Norman」

「Ha」

「We will carry out the plan tomorrow night. I will do something about the transit permit. Until then you complete the preparations 」

「Understood」

Even though he was worried, Kazuki chose to act the next day.
Guessing from Harold’s personality, he would kill Clara on the very same day, in other words, tonight. He judged that it would be the best if they made the situation stay close to the flow, as much as possible.

After Norman had left, in the room where there was only a single person, bathing in the western sunlight, he started simulating his actions and dialog for the time period starting from now until tomorrow night, a number of times.
He was taking part in a make-or-break match, where absolutely no mistakes

would be permitted, since he was responsible for the life of a person.
With this, there was no way he wouldn't be nervous.

To shake off the nervousness, Kazuki single-mindedly repeated the simulation. He was doing that the whole time, until it was time for dinner when his completely immersed consciousness was brought back to reality.

He would know whether it was effective.
When they began eating dinner, to deceive his farther, he was able to smoothly lie.

「Father, right, I have a request」

「What is it Harold?」

「Recently, it seems that a blacksmith has opened up a shop in Leitze, and it also seems that the swords sold there are amazing. I also wish to try swinging them」

「Fumu, in that case, shall we send a servant to randomly buy some swords from there」

「That will take some time. I want it now, as soon as possible」

「Harold really is gallant. In the future, he will become a splendid noble like you, dear」

His mother was laughing with a – Hoho Hoho.
Kazuki didn't know why he was gallant for just wanting a sword, but since it was no different than being a covering fire, he decided to take advantage of it.

「Mother is also telling that, hey isn't it fine? If there is a transit permit, we can send someone to buy them for my use」

「Doesn't Harold seem like he really wants it? Dear, won't it be fine to just write a few lines」

「Alright. Then, tomorrow morning, I will write the transmit permit」

「Thank you, father!」

If one only looked at the dining table filled with laughter, they would think that it was an intimate and happy family. But for the surrounding servants, it wasn't a thing that they could warmly watch over.

Everybody knew, that they only thought of the servants as rocks on the side of a road.
It would be the same even if they were there or not there. In the first place, they don’t even notice them.
Even though it was the family of their employer, they couldn’t find those kind of people likeable.

The bleak harmony, formed from talking with the current head and his wife, advanced with the night.
But nobody present here knew that this was a scene which was false.

Except for Kazuki and Norman.

Episode 4

There were some vigorous movements the next day. Mainly by 2 soldiers.

These were the 2 soldiers who knew the actions Kazuki had taken the day before.
To impose a gag order on this time’s plan to save Clara, thinking that it would be desirable to limit the number of people who were concerned with it, Kazuki had confirmed whether these 2 were people who could be trusted with confidential work, from Norman the day before.

Norman’s answer was a yes. For Kazuki, it was fortunate but, it was hard to say for the soldiers.
Called by Harold early in the morning, when they headed to his room filled with trepidation thinking about exactly what they were called for, all of a sudden they were given an explanation about the plan to save the servant.

Without their understanding catching up to the situation, the one thing that was carved deeply into the hearts of the 2 soldiers and the coachman of the horse cart, who was called like them, was that, if this plan failed and was discovered by a third party, their lives would be in danger.

Therefore, one of the soldiers completed the orders given one after the other with a – hii hii.
The other one was running around the town at the same time.
The only one who was at ease was the coachman, who had no work until night.

「Ha, Harold-sama, I have bought all the goods and come back」

「Toss them into the dungeon while not being seen. After finishing that, ride the horse and confirm the route to the highway with your own eyes」

「But I still haven’t brought the horse along……..」

「It’ll be fine if you borrow a horse from the ones in the mansion and go. However, give it an injury that arouses suspicion. Come back before it gets dark」

No mercy, precisely Spartan.
If explained why, since Kazuki himself was at his wit’s end, he didn’t have enough

room to pay attention to his surroundings.

Confirming that the soldier had headed towards the stable, Kazuki resumed practising his magic.
The magic he was practising was the low grade magic 『Flame Column』, directly translated, it was – pillar of fire (Hibashira). The magic which was thought to be fired by Harold in the original work, to kill Clara.

They actually didn't know what it was, but among the players who had watched the movie scene, 「It's probably Flame Column」 was what they had widely perceived it as, and so he decided to conform to it.
Well, it was relatively inconsequential but, it couldn't be helped that it's power was weak.

At first, with embarrassment added to him thinking whether he could really use magic, he performed the chant. Surprisingly, when it succeeded in the first try, as expected, he was excited, but when he looked at it properly, it only rose up to a height of 40 cm and its thickness was also about as small as an aluminum can.

In the original work, it had a height and thickness which could easily envelop a grown woman, and in the combat scene, it looked as though it was a pillar of fire which had a height of 2 – 3 m.
If this body really was that of Harold Stokes, then it should also be possible for Kazuki to do it.

It wasn't as though he would burn Clara to death so, Kazuki also knew that it wasn't absolutely necessary for it to have so much firepower. Even for the actual performance, he had no intentions to activate the magic as extensively as shown in the movie scene.

That said, since he was letting Clara get away, there was no way he could show a corpse and so, he needed enough firepower to show that he had burnt her so much that not even cinders remained. For that reason, from some time ago, Kazuki was practising magic while simultaneously, leaving burn marks on the ground and tree trunks and also burning leaves.
Even though it was an open location, he was still inside a forest with dense, overgrown trees. Carefully paying attention so as to not start a forest fire, he

was repeating a truly boring operation.

「Fuu……..It should be enough to this degree」

There was no change in his arrogant tone even though he was speaking to himself. For Harold, it seemed as though this was how he spoke originally. Leaving that aside, for the time being, he disguised the vicinity as though it was the aftermath of a fire. Later, for the act, to show this off, if he just made a pillar of fire, it would be thought that it wasn't a mystery that the corpse had been burnt off.

Honestly, he was a bit anxious. Or rather, he was full of anxiety.
Since his decision would divide whether a person died or not, there was no way his mind could be calm.

After all, they are game characters – Even if he thought of it like that, after actually exchanging words with them and experiencing those emotions, they were already human beings as far as Kazuki was concerned. He couldn't possibly view them as just computer icons.
No matter how much preparations he had setup, 「With this, its absolutely fine」- he probably couldn't be convinced that that was the case.

On the contrary, currently for Kazuki, that was fortunate.
When he came to his senses, he was lost in a world which seemed to be inside a game, and he was currently personally experiencing the unprecedented situation of possessing a character's body.
Under such a situation, it wouldn't be easy to keep calm.

However, presently, Kazuki could see the life-threatening crisis approaching him, and since he was doing his all to avoid it, he didn't have the leeway to be concerned with other affairs. It was close to a kind of running away from reality, but it was an unshakeable fact that by doing so, he maintained mental stability.

With this, is it really fine; Do any defects exist in the plan that I have thought out; Is there anything more that I have to do – Kazuki, without stopping these thoughts, was immersed in making careful preparations until the sun set.

And then, the long awaited full-moon night came.
In the forest illuminated by moonlight, Clara arrived, lead by the soldier.

She wasn't wearing the maid outfit that servants normally wore, but casual clothes often seen in the town. During daytime, Kazuki had sent the soldier to buy them, and had ordered him to tell her to change into those clothes.

「Umm……..」

「Keep quiet」

He rudely interrupted Clara, who was uneasy. Even now, Kazuki was extremely nervous.
For a while, the strained silence continued. Kazuki, Norman, Clara and soldier A-the one who was slacking off yesterday-The thing that broke off the silence which had descended upon these people, was the sound of a horse's hooves impacting on the ground, from far away.

「…….Finally」

Deep from inside the forest, from the the direction of the town, the ones who appeared were the soldier, who was brushing aside plants, and a small girl, riding on 2 horses.
When they saw each other, Clara and the girl simultaneously raised their voices.

「Mama!」

「Colette!」

Clara strongly embraced the little girl, who was let down from the horse. With that in his peripheral vision, Kazuki received the report from the soldier.

「Sorry for being late, Harold-sama. It took some time to cross the forest while pulling the horse, so………」

「That is inconsequential. While bringing that girl, was your figure seen by the town-folk?」

「No problem. But, it seems as though a person going from the town to the mansion like her, has leaked out the circumstances, and rumors that Clara was already going to be killed are spreading out」

「Tsk」

He involuntarily clicked his tongue. Now that it was mentioned, it was obvious, but he didn't think that far ahead.

As expected, he still wasn't calm enough.

But for now, he didn't have the leisure to worry about it. He put off regretting and reflecting for a later time.
To the 2 people who were hugging each other with tears floating in their eyes, he talked to them in a compromising tone.

「I'll present 2 choices to you bastards」

In front of the faces of the 2 people who were looking up at Kazuki, he raised up his index finger.

「First, die here」

Towards Kazuki's words, Colette let out a voice as though she was convulsing. In contrast to that, Clara was staring straight-forwardly at Kazuki's eyes. In front of their eyes, he next raised up his second finger.

「Second, discard this land and start a new livelihood outside the Stokes territory」

「Eh?」

With this suggestion, as expected, even Clara opened her eyes wide. Outside the territory, in other words, if they migrated to another noble's territory, the Stokes house couldn't interfere with their lives.
That is, acquittal.

「If the latter option is chosen, then it will be declared that you bastards are dead. Coming back here once again isn't permitted and all the connections made until now must be severed」

「………Will you forgive me?」

Murmuring as though partly in a daze, Clara uttered that.

「About what?」

But, in a haughty manner, Harold asked that question in return. As for Kazuki, he wanted to tell -「What is it about? 」- and play dumb with a smile.

First of all, the cause of this racket was when Harold bumped into Clara, who was watering the flower bed, and after slipping down he got dirty. It was clear

that it was a really stupid incident in the game. It couldn’t just be called as pitiful, getting killed for such a thing.
For this reason, the resentment Colette felt towards Harold in the original game was extremely high.

Naturally, Kazuki didn’t even think of it as anything and it wasn’t as though he was angry, since his consciousness only surfaced after the incident.

「It’s fine, so quickly choose. As for me, it would be convenient and helpful if I killed you here and now」

「………I’m extremely sorry. I feel that I still want to continue living with this girl」

(Right~)

With this, if she told something like -「Please kill me」- all the troubling things he had worked for, would come to nothing.
First of all, there was no way Kazuki could carry out the act of killing people.

「Fu~n, boring. Then, take this and go」

Kazuki produced a jute bag from his breast pocket and casually threw it towards them. Opening that drawstring bag and casting a glance at the insides, Clara stiffened up due to being surprised once again.

「Th, this is ……..?」

「Consolation money. Don’t spout out that you don’t know what it means」

「–Thank you very much」

Clara put her hands on the ground and with a quivering voice, expressed her gratitude. The money itself was the allowance his father had given, when Harold had told that he wanted a sword and so, it was hard for Kazuki to accept that gratitude frankly.

「I’ll give this to you」

As though hiding his embarrassment, Kazuki also handed over a thing to Colette. It was a necklace which had the emblem of the knight order of the Saint King -a single-edged sword imitating wings, giving off a silvery obsidian shine-as an ornament. It was an article which he had discovered when he was in the middle of thoroughly searching Harold's room.

「Never let this part from you, always wear it around your neck. This is the condition for letting you bastards run away. Understood?」

「Ye, yes」

Although she was frightened, Colette nodded.

「……….But, if a guy who wants it appears, give it to him. Only give it to a guy whose age is around yours and appears to be a bit skilled. In exchange for that, make him promise to protect you as a knight」

「Uhh……?」

Colette was confused at Harold's excessively detailed orders. Even if he wanted to explain it in a more simplified manner, his mouth wouldn't allow him to do that.
Thereupon, a timely help came from beside him.

「Harold-sama is telling you to hand it over to a person who would protect you」

Nice translation – thinking that, Kazuki clenched his fist lightly and did a Guts-pose.
Colette who understood its meaning this time, rigorously nodded her head twice.

「Un, understood」

「Then go already. It is unbearable for me to be troubled by you bastards anymore」

Turning around, Kazuki gave orders to the 2 soldiers. It was arranged that Clara and Colette were to ride the horses from here and were to be lead until the the vicinity of the highway. After that, there was no other choice than to leave it to the soldiers A, B and the coachman of the horse-drawn cart.

「Harold-sama. Really, thank you very much」

Just before straddling onto the horse, Clara and Colette together, bent their waist deeply, announced that, and then left.
Undoubtedly, they were showing their gratitude for him doing everything that

was possible, for them.

However, originally speaking, Harold was the cause for all this so there was no reason for them to thank him. Certainly, if it weren’t for Kazuki, Clara might have died, but in the first place, if it weren’t for Harold, then there was no way they would have fallen into such a predicament.

(For a rescue operation when I’m acting in my own play, even if you express gratitude……)

At least, there was no way he could feel proud. Well, it’s fine since Clara and Colette can live happily after this – thinking that, for the time being, he put a stop to the gloomy feelings in his heart.
There was one last job left to do.

「Norman, go back first」

「………Understood」

Norman responded to Harold’s command after hesitating for a breath. Looking at Harold’s expression, which seemed as though he was brooding over something, he hesitated because he was thinking whether it would be fine to leave this boy alone.
However, that expression returned back to a calm one in a very small amount of time. In that case, now isn’t the time to unnecessarily interject – thinking that, Norman decided to withdraw.

And then, he immediately realized that it was a mistake.

While he was reluctantly heading back to the mansion, the wind carried Harold’s voice to Norman’s ears.
When the voice, which was broken due to it being mixed among the sound of rustling of the tree leaves, reached his ears, Norman reflexively stopped walking.

「Ha, unsightly face………no value in living……….」

The boy’s voice, which could be heard faintly, contained self-derision

「No way……..forgiven……..」

As though repenting for one’s sins

「Life……..useless…… At least, if…….death………,right?」

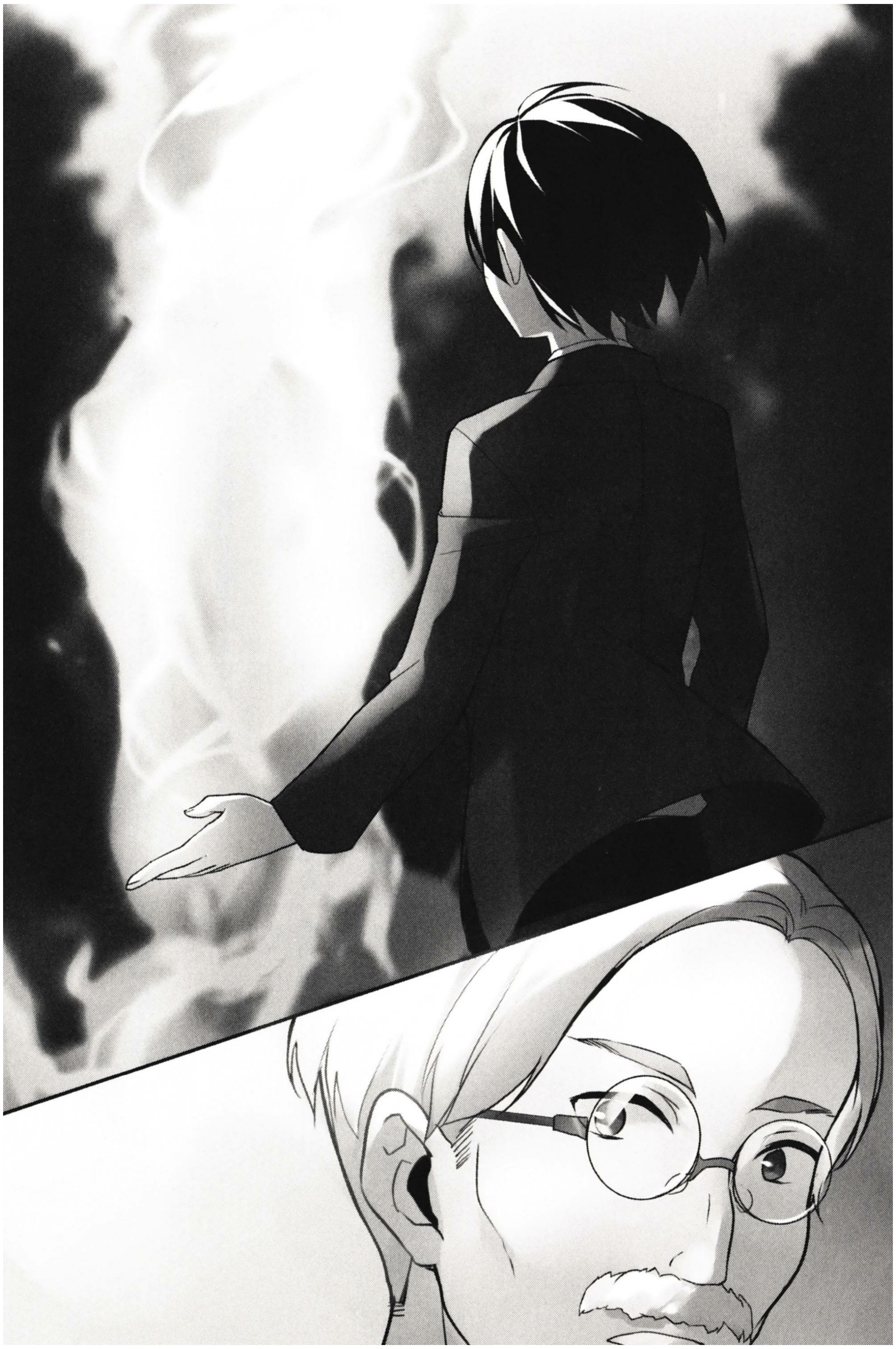
And yet, it contained a sharpness which could cut through one’s body.

The monologue of a 10 year old boy. With a cleverness unbecoming of a child, he saved the parent and child, and he, who had accomplished a praise-worthy thing, was suffering.
All alone, so that no one could find out.

「It’s over–『Flame Column』」

(Gou)

A thunderous roar, together with a hot wind blew through the forest. The pillar of fire, which was growing higher and higher, as though it was the manifestation of the feelings inside Harold’s heart, was fiercely blazing.
As though burning down the pain contained in that small body.



The conflict held within Harold. Norman, catching a glimpse of that part and being petrified while in a daze, couldn't move until Harold came back, stamping on leaves and branches.
Seeing Norman like that, Harold's expression warped.

「What are you doing at a place like this? I should have ordered you to go back first」

Kazuki's tone became rough. This was because, just now, he had spoken out the dialog of the event.
In a place where nobody was present, mocking and laughing at a Clara who had already left long ago, and talking to himself while murmuring – this was a shame

play where his dark history shined brilliantly. If somebody heard that, it was at the level where he would hang himself or at least seriously consider doing it.

Much less, if people started thinking that Harold was a sad person who had chuunibyou, then it wouldn't just end with the destruction of his character. He would have to silence anyone who would expose that shameful behavior, because if he didn't, then there was a possibility that in the future it would lead to a troublesome situation.

「Everything that happened, everything that you saw and everything that you heard today, forget about them completely. Otherwise, without telling it to anyone in the future, carry it to your grave. I won't accept an answer other than a "Yes"」

As though vigorously pressing for an answer, he keeps talking to Norman without a pause.
It was something that he was desperate for to that extent, but that desperation held a different meaning in Norman's eyes.

(Trying to hide his weakness to such an extent, why………Even though he is still a child, just how big of a responsibility is Harold-sama trying to carry)

The attitude obstinate enough to not depend on anyone else was sorrow itself. But Norman could do nothing other than to nod his head.

Taking a glance at Norman who showed his acknowledgement, Harold left with a quick pace. That retreating figure looked as though it was extremely worn out.

Perhaps, Harold, taking his biological parents as a good example of what not to do, without having any real power presently, was trying to avoid a direct confrontation and was deceiving them.
He couldn't do anything other than that. If by chance, his thoughts were discovered by his parents due to a third party, there was no mistake that it would give rise to some discord.

If it were a normal kid, they would likely clash with their parents as it was, but since this boy was sagacious, he might have understood the dimensions by which it would affect the future, if he had done that.
For the sake of it not becoming like that, he had chosen to deceive his parents and all the people in the mansion. Thus, not a single person who had anything to

do with the Stokes house could see through his facade to know what he really was like.

His motive for acting like he always was, wouldn’t have been clear if it wasn’t for this irregular incident, and most probably, it also wouldn’t be found out in the future.
Towards the boy who was continuously fighting alone, he, who had judgemental thoughts, didn’t have any rights to be worried about him.
Norman found that to be unbearably vexing.

「………No, I can’t just keep regretting and do nothing」

I’m surely going to keep regretting the fact that I couldn’t get close to Harold during the past 10 years, for my whole life.
But, doing only that, won’t solve anything. These 10 years of inactivity, there’s no way other than to get it back from using all the remaining time, from now on.

Until the day that kind boy loses the reason to keep tormenting his heart under the pretense of evil.

◇

How much time has passed from being shaken due to the cart.
While stroking the hair of my daughter, who was sleeping using my lap as a pillow, I noticed the sky growing lighter. Daybreak must already be near.

But still, Clara wasn’t feeling drowsy and was feeling a fluffy sensation as though she was floating in midair.
In these past 2 days, her world had turned around completely.

When she was imprisoned in the jail, she already thought that she was going to be executed. The only thing she felt was the fear towards death and despair for leaving her only daughter alone.
The one who saved her from that was a boy, whose age differed from her daughter’s by only a single year.

For the sake of a servant, who could be changed easily any number of times, he had handed over clothes, horses and a cart and also, a huge amount of money for them to start a new life, free of charge.
There was no way Harold’s parents, who had abused Clara by calling her an

『inferior species』, would allow such a thing. Which meant that this was something he himself had done.

While they were being escorted to the cart, she heard from the 2 soldiers about how the boy had saved them.
First, telling that he wanted a sword from a famous blacksmith in Lietze, he obtained the transit permit. He gave it for the coachman's use and then, asked him to pretend departing to Lietze early in the morning, while he hid in the forest which was in the vicinity of the highway, where there were less people, a bit away from the town.
Meanwhile, the 2 soldiers, who were in civilian clothes so that they wouldn't stand out, went to the town to loan the horses and to buy and gather the necessary goods. 「Thanks to that, we ran around the town for the whole day」- smiling wryly while telling that, but also feeling a bit proud, the soldiers narrated.

And then, after entering Brosch, Clara and Colette would remain in the village, while the horse-cart and 1 of the soldiers would continue on to Lietze. It wouldn't look to be suspicious because, on the shortest route from the Stokes territory to Lietze, they would need to pass through Brosch village.
The round trip to Lietze would roughly take 4 – 6 days, so a delay of 1 full day was also within calculations.

When Clara heard this, she couldn't help but be surprised. A 10 year old boy had thought up such an elaborate plan in not even half a day, and had splendidly accomplished it like this.
To add to that, the money given to her was the money given to him by his father to buy a sword for himself.

Then, when they went to Lietze, they wouldn't be able to buy the sword – when Clara was worried about that, the coachman stifled his laughter.
When she asked the reason for his laughter, he told her that he had asked Harold the same question when he had revealed the series of plans to him. And, he had gotten this reply back.

「Bastard, are you an idiot. Won't it be fine if you choose a cheap sword randomly」

It was as though there was some gentleness mixed in those sharp words.

Maybe he had sensed that, since hearing the coachman telling it as though it was enjoyable, left a deep impression on her.

By no means could Clara's lifetime be called as smooth sailing but still, Colette being born and encountering Harold, she thought that those 2 things were irreplaceable.

「Clara-san, are you awake?」

「Yes. Did something happen?」

「Brosch village is coming into view」

Hearing the coachman's words, she peeked out from behind.
The thing that came into Clara's view was, illuminated by the sun rays rising from the horizon and covered in morning mist, a sparkling Brosch village.

「We'll have arrived by the time the sun has completely risen. Until then, how about resting for a while?」

「Thank you for your consideration. But, for now, I want to burn this into my memory………」

「Is that so. Well, I understand, those feelings」

Clara, the coachman and even the 2 soldiers, had their hearts stolen by the scenery which was like an illusion.
By that form of Brosch village, which was as though it was blessing Clara's and Colette's new life.

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Episode 5

Listening to Harold's report, his parents believed that Clara and her daughter Colette, were dead. It was unlikely that they would even think of doubting their son.
Even though their son had killed a woman and her child, seeing them only praising him extravagantly by telling –「You have talent in magic」, Kazuki felt that the gap between him and his parents would never be covered in his whole lifetime. As long as they didn't rid themselves of this kind of sense of values, there was no way he could see eye-to-eye with them.

Well, because of them blindly believing in him, they didn't doubt anything he told. So for now, that was more than enough-was what he thought.
For now, it could be said that the plan to rescue Clara and Colette was a success.

Truthfully, this was when he should've been happy, but confronted by a new problem, for Kazuki, time was precious. The most he could do was to pray that Colette would get close to Liner.
Leaving that aside, the thing that was troubling Kazuki was how to deal with the growing displeasure of the populace, due to the political pressure of the Stokes family. In short, it could be summed up as severe taxation.

Since the Stokes territory, with the exception of the towering mountain range to the northeast, was facing the plains, and the highway was laid out as though running beside the city, it was considerably blessed in the field of transportation.
There were no seas in the surroundings, but there was a river formed by a stream from the mountain range, which passed nearby, and a forest stretched out from the northwest to the eastern side so, it was a land suitable for forestry too.
The circulation of people and money was good, and nature was abundant. Naturally, both primary and secondary industries were prosperous.

However, since the Stokes territory wasn't very vast, they couldn't make use of those benefits. Advanced despite being a small town – was the scope of it.
On a self governing area with that scope of economy, the Stokes family was imposing quite a heavy tax.

For the residents living in the vicinity of the town center, who had considerably high income, it wasn't as though they couldn't pay the tax, but for the agricultural community living in the suburbs, it was quite a burden.
Particularly, in the recent years, being assaulted by natural disasters as though it was an annual occurrence, the volume of crops harvested was unfavorable, and due to that, profit went down and the farmers running under deficit weren't less.

For that reason, voices rose up from the farms, appealing to reduce the tax temporarily, but there was no way that couple would lend their ears for something like that. On the contrary, the pressure was tightened by telling -「If you make any more noise, I will raise the tax rates even more」- It was dealt by threatening them like that.

There were talks about how the populace suffered from the political pressure in the game, but there were no detailed descriptions about that portion. It was likely that, without Norman's documents, even Kazuki wouldn't have noticed this.
If the present condition lasted for a long while, the displeasure accumulated due to the pressuring of the Stokes family would without a doubt, explode at some point of time. That would be the first sign of indication to the fall of the Stokes family.

Well, for Kazuki, no matter what happened to this family, it didn't have anything to do with him, but the chances of him getting involved and undergoing a disastrous experience was extraordinarily high and so, there was no way he couldn't take some measures.

「Excuse me~………Tte, what are you doing?」

Showing his face from the opened door, without even waiting for a reply from knocking the door, was the accomplice who helped in rescuing Clara, Zen – the coachman of the horse-drawn cart.
Somehow, as of late, even though there was no work for him, it became as though he was involved with whatever Harold was doing. No matter how harsh his speech was, other than laughing dryly, it was as though he wasn't enduring at all.

Zen was 19 years old, a youth in the same generation as Kazuki. Also, among the males who were working in the mansion, his age was the closest to Harold, and in Kazuki's mind, he was an existence that Kazuki could easily associate with. He was somewhat like a dog, or rather, it could be said that Zen's personality played a big role in making people feel friendly towards him.

He tilted his head when he saw Kazuki's eccentric behavior.
Even though it was called eccentric, he was just recording the growth of plants which were there on the balcony of about 50 cm, furnished on the window.

「It is unrelated to you. Quickly, close the door」

「O~tto, It somewhat has the scent of a secret」

Closing the door behind him, as expected, Zen spouted out some dog-like remarks and peeked at the balcony. As for his attitude, it could be said that it was disrespectful at best.
About 20 potted plants were lined up on the balcony, which were divided into 3 segments and 3 types of plants were being grown. For some reason, there were some specimens among them whose growth was preeminent.

「Bell tubers and Bluna, and also red Groot………Are you going to eat them after they grow up?」
(Tl – What are those? (ノಠ益ಠ)ノ┻━┻ I suck at translating katakana. HELP
The original – スズイモにブルーナ、それに赤グルト(suzu imo ni buruna, soreni aka guruto))

「Do you want me to cut out your guts and, including the pot, shove it inside your stomach?(※Should I make Zen eat it?) 」

「No thanks!」

「………」

If it is like this, we might never have a relaxed conversation-while being depressed by that thought, his hand kept moving while recording.
As Zen stated, all of these were edible vegetables. Frankly, only leaves couldn't be seen under the earth for bell tubers and it's name fit it correctly.
Adding onto that, it was in the top three most cultivated principal crops of the agricultural community in the Stokes territory.

「Even so, the way they’ve been grown is different, isn’t it」

Without being cowed by Kazuki’s statement, Zen asked that with a look filled with interest. A heart made of steel or tough nerves, either way, he was resilient. While admiring Zen, who seemed to have the endurance level of a sandbag, Kazuki held out a glass bottle.

「There are those which were watered with water mixed with this, and those which weren’t」

The thing held in Kazuki’s hand, which was familiar to all fans of『Brave Hearts』, was a semi-transparent bluish bottle. The thing which was extremely handy only at the start of the game, an item which doubled the stamina recovery rate.
It’s name is『Life Potion』.

「Life Potion for crops……..?」

He had never heard of a technique like that to cultivate crops. But, the ones which were given the Life Potion were obviously bigger and juicier.
Zen’s eyes showed shock at Kazuki’s thinking which wasn’t bound by any common sense, but for Kazuki, it was just another simple thought.

In the system of『Brave Hearts』, “Compounding” existed. By mixing many different ingredients, items were created, but for some of the ingredients, if one didn’t cultivate them on their own, they wouldn’t be able to get their hand on them.
Furthermore, even if one nurtured ingredients according to the manual, since the probability of cultivating the wanted ingredients was extremely low, the players plowed the fields with the intentions of getting some hits.
(Tl – The players follow the Japanese saying – Even a poor marksman will hit the target with enough shots)

Eventually, the fact that the harvest rate goes up when Life Potion or the upper ranked『Ether』is used, became known, and then, players who changed to Hero-cum-Farmer started scattering recovery items on the fields.
Similarly, Kazuki was also one of those players.

To test whether that could be applied even here, Kazuki obtained the pots, soil for the crops, the crop seeds and also the Life Potion approaching its expiration date, which was sleeping in the warehouse of the Stokes house, through Norman.

But, when the crops were grown using only Life Potion, even though their growth was fast, they withered before bearing fruits. So, while using it with water, many trials were repeated, and finally, a suitable ratio of water and Life Potion was found.
Kazuki tore off a few of the red groot and tossed it towards Zen.

「O~to~to」

「Eat」

「Raw?」

Zen, who nimbly caught all of them, didn't even hide the unpleasant expression on his face, listening to Harold's orders.
He understood those feelings. Among the vegetables Kazuki knew, the taste of red groot was closest to onions.
Even though it could be eaten without sticking it in fire, fundamentally, it seemed to be a vegetable which was cooked by heating.

「Curse your own thoughtless actions for willingly sticking your head into others' affairs」

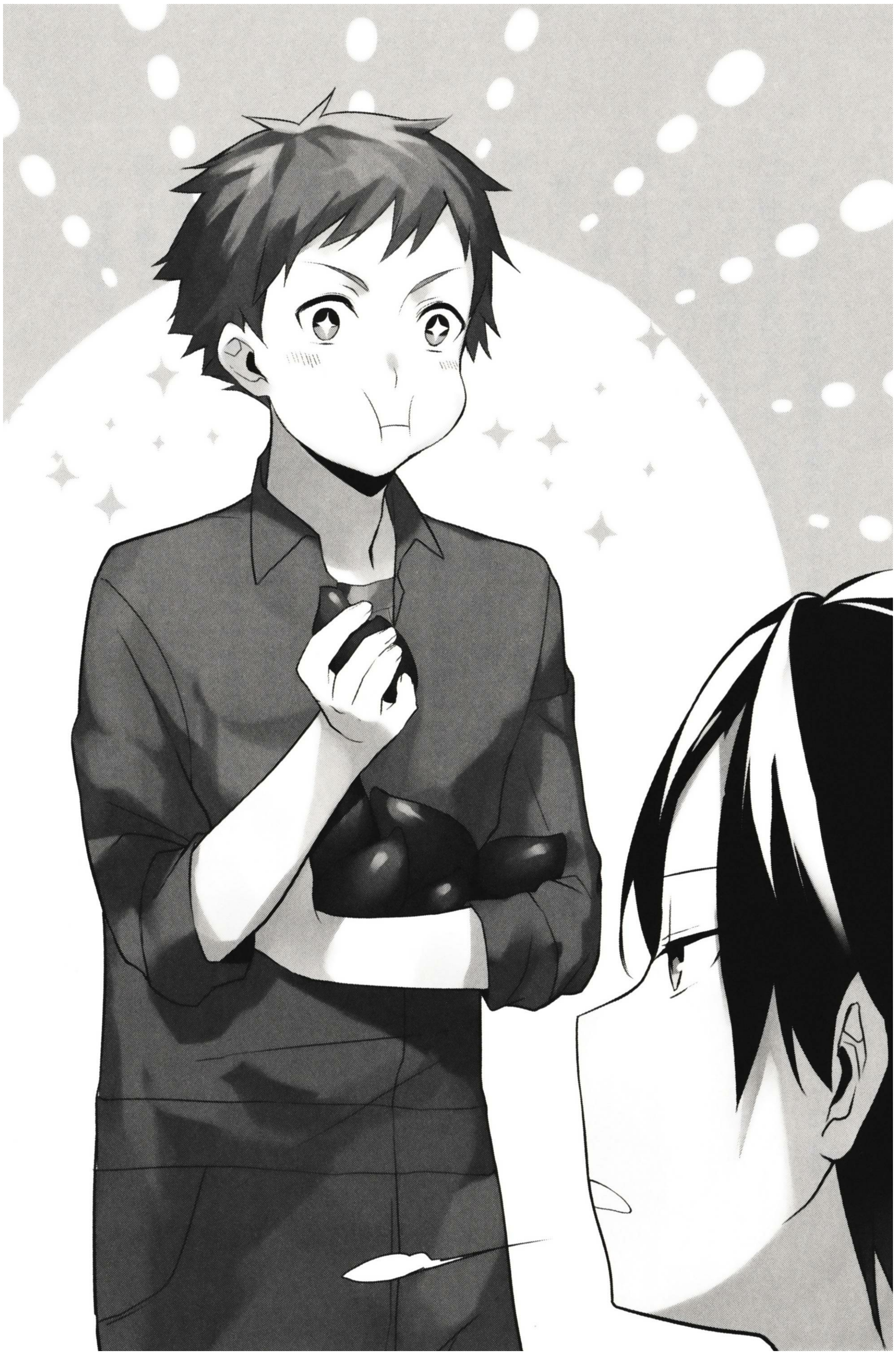
「…….Eei, W,well!」

Maybe giving up, without resisting anymore, Zen bit into the red groot.
Shaku-A satisfying sound rang out.

「Nn!?」

Zen, who had swallowed the red groot, raised an excited voice.

「What is this! It is sweeter than normal and absurdly delicious!?」



It felt good to see such a reaction. That the Life Potion farming method would have such an effect, this exceeded even Kazuki's expectations.

Even though it was a happy miscalculation, as expected, having only Zen as feedback was too less.

「Take that to the kitchen and come back after making the cooks eat it. Their thoughts on the taste, the difference between the ordinary ones, whether it is worth putting it on the market, and other such information, ask them about it」

「Roger!」

Zen bowed with a snap. Since he was holding the red groot in his left hand, it didn’t look appropriate.

「The matters of where you obtained it or under whose orders you are moving–」

「Is a secret, isn’t it? I understand, Harold-sama!」

Zen answered like that with a full-faced smile.

For him, his assessment of the boy known as Harold had completely changed due to the previously executed plan.

Until now, he had only thought of him as an extremely conceited, self-centered, dumb brat, but it seemed as though he was only pretending like that with some sort of aim. Harold’s true nature was rather, the exact opposite of that.

Kind, racking his brains for people with a lower social status than his, he had both emotional maturity and wisdom.

After coming to know about that, he could only see Haorld’s foul-mouthed nature as nothing but hypocrisy. In a sense, it could be said that the only way Harold could seem to be childish was by this.

Like this, for entering the room and talking about this and that, other than spouting out abusive words, he didn’t seem to be displeased.

Considering Harold’s age, he should be aware about things like the difference in social status. It would have been fine if the other party was a person who had a close relationship from childhood, but the first time Zen talked with him was just the other day.

When a person like that showed disrespectful behavior, it was as though he didn’t mind it at all.

Behavior as though to show that he had no interest in keeping up a facade.

For Zen, such a Harold Stokes was highly likeable.

It was clear that again, he was trying to do something with this red groot.

Surely, it was something which he, who had no knowledge, could never even think of.

Zen was happy to help in whatever form it might be.

Episode 6

「Then, I'm off!」

And so, after receiving Harold's command, Zen rushed out of the room in high spirits. Since he didn't know why Zen had so much enthusiasm, the only thing he did was to tilt his head in puzzlement.
It would be good if he doesn't mess up due to being too enthusiastic – thinking that, he felt a tinge of anxiety.

Well, if he trusted in Norman's judgement, nothing bad will happen – convincing himself with that, as a change of pace, he decided to start his sword training, which was about to become a daily routine.

This was the world of an RPG. Outside the range of humans' livelihood, normally, monsters were strutting about. To survive in this extremely dangerous world, it went without saying that a certain level of strength was required. Much less, when Kazuki needed to jump in and live within a vortex of violent battles as Harold Stokes.

He wanted to avoid fighting as much as possible but that wasn't possible in accordance to the original game event.
Therefore, in order to be prepared for emergencies, he started imitating swordsmanship.

When he went to the backyard, holding the sword purchased by Zen in Lietze, after confirming that nobody was present in the surroundings, he started implementing the training menu that he himself had thought up.

Grasping the hilt in both hands, he raised it overhead and brought it down in one swing. From that state, switching his grip to the left, he moved his right hand by 1 unit to the upper-right side. From there, making the right foot on which he had stepped forward as the axis, he rotated in clockwise direction, and using centrifugal force, he cut in a straight line from the left.

This was the basic combination which Harold used in the game. This was of the type of serial barrage which appeared when the attack button of the controlled character was spammed thrice.

Kazuki, who didn’t even have experience in Kendo, couldn’t judge whether or not this attack would really be effective in actual combat, but for now, he thought of making this as his base.
At first, like the practice-swings in Kendo, he practised by stepping forward and cutting down from the overhead position, but imagining actual combat, he felt that the benefits of practising moves similar to the ones in the game was larger.

When close to a month passed after starting a training like this, his body grew accustomed to the movements themselves. The sense to grasp that, wasn’t Kazuki’s, but was probably Harold’s.
Come to think of it, even though Harold was the lowest of bastards, traversing solo through a dungeon and clashing with the hero party, in battle, he was quite an outstanding character. If I keep training like this seriously, I might be able to obtain strength which isn’t inferior to that.

(If I thought of it like that, my tension rises up a little!)

Even encountering an irrational situation, thinking in a manner like that, as expected, Kazuki was a fan of『Brave Hearts』through and through.
Although he had possessed the most loathed person in the original work, when it became that he might be able to use the same skills as the ones inside the game, he couldn’t suppress his heart from dancing.

With determination and excitement as the source of encouragement, Kazuki silently continued swinging his sword. A small boy lightly brandishing an adult-sized sword – if seen from an outsider’s perspective, it was quite a bizarre scene.

Originally, he wouldn’t even be able to decently swing it, but Harold’s high-spec body compensated for that. But even Kazuki didn’t notice that fact. Somehow, the boy known as Harold appeared to be excellent.

Thus, providing assistance in the cultivation of crops, sword training, and humoring his parents – after these became his routine, about a month and a half passed by. Around the time when all the potted plants in the balcony grew lush and thick, at last, the preparations for the next move were completed.

That day, the one whom Kazuki summoned to his room was a slender man, who wore glasses. With an age in the first-half of his thirties, maybe due to the sharp look in his eyes, he gave of an impression of being cold and unfeeling.

The man’s name was Jake. One of the people who managed the finances of the Stokes family. Even the usually unamiable, taciturn Jake was considerably perplexed by the situation he was in.

There were totally 3 people in the room. The owner of the room, Harold, the veteran servant, Norman, and Zen.

「Sit」

To him who had come to the room, the first thing Kazuki said after opening his mouth, was that.
Norman, who was diagonally behind Harold, handed over a draft containing a few pages to Jake, who had quietly sat down on the chair.

「Read that」

「Ok」

What on earth is this about – Jake’s bewilderment kept growing.

However, after he opened the draft and started reading its contents, the look in his eyes changed.
What was written down was the detailed financial situation of the Stokes house. It was filled with a headache inducing amount of numbers, but sadly, they were numbers which Jake had become used to seeing.

「Are there any large mistakes in the entry?」

「………No, there aren’t」

Let alone mistakes, this was a complete copy of the contents of the financial management report that Jake had compiled. He properly checked whether there were any defects or not in the documents he had prepared.
Perhaps, was he called to enter at least 1 false charge into the contents of this? – That sort of thought crossed his mind.

「Right?」

But, contrary to his predictions, Harold sighed gravely. There was no appearance of wanting to rebuke Jake.
If he had to say, then Harold’s voice was as though he was fed up from the bottom of his heart.

「From the past few years, the finances of the Stokes house has been in the red. The prime cause is the pointless extravagance due to my parents wanting to put on airs. The reserves from up until the previous generation and the heavy taxation is compensating for it but even that won’t last long, and the burden on the populace only keeps increasing. Any objections to this opinion?」

「I have awareness that it is heading towards that direction」

Jake’s emotional subtleties never easily surfaced, but inside, he was on the verge of panicking.
He was astonished that a young boy had perfectly comprehended the contents of the financial management report, but more than anything, he wasn’t able to grasp the intentions of the question at all.

Harold himself, being the eldest son of the head, was criticising his parents, the current head. He didn’t know what kind of behavior was right.
Being at a loss, Jake looked at Norman. But he was only standing behind Harold with a calm expression and it didn’t seem as though he would respond to Jake’s glance.

「Even though the situation isn’t urgent, as it is, someday, both the Stokes house and the populace won’t be able to maintain their livelihood. Well, for you bastards, it would be better if the Stokes house collapses」

「Please don’t say things like that. If anybody heard it, they would misunderstand and think that you are rebelling」

For the time being, Jake takes the safe route.
However, from Kazuki’s point of view, it wasn’t necessarily a misunderstanding.
He hadn’t thought of outrageous things like causing internal problems to steal the inheritance and he hadn’t even thought of doing whatever it takes for the continued existence of the Stokes house and for becoming the next head.
Frankly speaking, he wouldn’t care even if it got crushed like in the original work.

Together with the ending of the original work, if he faded out and safely became commoner A, it would be fine.
Of course, the best solution would be for him to return back to his original world as fast as possible, but to do that, he hadn’t even found a single clue and so, for now, he put it aside.

「Hn. At any rate, the populace, particularly, if the agricultural district’s proceeds aren’t increased, it’s very clear that in the near future, we’ll go bankrupt」

Jake couldn’t respond. This was because it was true that the agriculture in the Stokes territory had already started declining.
Due to imposing a heavy tax rate, since management became strained, people who quit and people who left from the Stokes territory increased. This trend was remarkable with small farmhouses in particular.

If this flow didn’t stop, revenue from the agricultural district would drop considerably. When that happened, it wasn’t known whether the current head would resolve to loosen the tax rates due to the disadvantage.
Jake didn’t believe that that man would take such measures. Conversely, he would probably increase the rates even more and pluck money from wherever it could be plucked.

(Has Harold-sama comprehended that………?)

No matter what, it wasn’t a problem which a boy of 10 years old, would rack his brain’s for. Normally, it would be difficult to even read the contents of the financial management report correctly.
But, for the boy in front of him, it seemed as though something of that level wasn’t even a wall. Jake immediately realized that.

「That is why I called you. I’ll leave the inspection of the agricultural district to you」

「What do you mean」

「Zen」

「Hai Hai!」

Responding to Harold’s call, Zen opened the window connected to the balcony, picked up a basket in which red groot were bunched up, and with a thud, placed it in front of Jake.
Again, being unable to catch up to the situation, his eyes became dots.

「Um, This is……?」

「Now, now, without saying anything here, relish in Harold-sama's handmade red groot」

「You are the one who's talking too much. Do you want to become fertilizer?」

「Sorry!」

「By Harold-sama…..?」

If he frankly expressed his thoughts, it would be「Why?」.
He didn't know why Harold was cultivating vegetables in his room and, he also didn't know why Harold was trying to make him eat it.
That said, since it was taken out like this, he couldn't not try it, so timidly he bit into a red groot.

「……! S, sweet?」

「Right?」

「Why the hell are you proud……..」

Watching Zen show no sign of respect to Harold, Jake's innards went cold, but without even rebuking him, Harold just held his temples as though he was amazed by Zen.

「Anyways, the thing you ate just now was something I raised with my own method. Lend me your power to spread that method」

「Why me?」

「To implement this farming method, naturally, there will be some costs, and depending on the situation, exclusive equipment might be necessary. Since you have thorough knowledge of Stokes' finances and as an inspection official, since you also know the situation well, I judged that you would be suitable」

Certainly, calculating the necessary expenses if the required materials and their rough quantity were decided, and depending on the equipment, deciding whether installing them would be acceptable or not or making proposals to satisfy some conditions, all these could be done if it were Jake.
Harold's point was logical.

The problem was whether spreading the new farming method was implementable or not.

Compared to the normal ones, it was remarkably easy to eat this red groot. It could be guessed that if this went out on the market, the demand would be great.

　But if the manufacturing cost was equal to or more than the market price, then there would be no meaning in doing it. There might also be farmhouses which might not be able to endure until the deficit, increased due to the initial expenses, changes over to net profit.
It was a huge problem for implementation.

　「It seems like you can think」

　Towards Jake, who remained silent even when asked for cooperation, rather than feeling hurt, Harold was in admiration of him.
For Kazuki, rather than people who would agree for everything due to pressure from their superiors, he needed people who would think about things with their own head like this. Kazuki only knew about the parts which were depicted in the game, and people like Jake and Norman, who were likely to notice problems other than the ones he knew, would be dependable hereafter.

　「If it could improve the present condition, I would help as much as possible. But……..」

　「You can't readily agree since you just heard the talk, right? If it were father, he would have angrily told you to not talk back or in the worst case, thrown you into the dungeon」

　Listening to those words, Jake's body stiffened and thought – As expected, after all, he is the son of that man.
But for some reason, Norman and Zen smiled wryly.

　「……..Well, that is the natural reaction. If it was readily consented for without even asking for detailed explanation, there would be another Zen and so, my anxiety would only increase」

　「What does that mean?」

　「It means that you should also use your head a bit more」

　「You're awful…….」

Ignoring the easily depressed Zen, Kazuki continues the conversation.
From here, the real issue began.

「Well then, as you wished, let me inform you. This will become the key」

While showing the bottle of Life Potion, he began explaining to Jake.
Kazuki's plan was like this.

The farming method of giving Life Potion to the crops, temporarily named as LP farming method.
At present, of the 3 kinds of vegetables tested upon, it was confirmed that all of them had fast growth and additionally, their sweetness had increased.

This wouldn't be tested in all the fields abruptly, but to start with, a portion, that too, by having some of the farmhouses do a joint trial run. The biggest reason was to disperse the financial risks if it failed.
Additionally, this also had implications of rescuing farmhouses with a small operation scope where even a single mistake would be fatal, those who had a painful monetary situation, and those who couldn't spare farmland for the LP farming method.

Even if the LP farming method went well, the growth of disparity between farmhouses which have some financial leeway and those that don't, must be held back as much as possible, and after bunching up a few of the farmhouses, it would be ideal if the Life Potions about to be discarded, among the ones stored in the Stokes house, would be enough to deal with the situation. If this was done, even the initial costs wouldn't be much.

During this 1 month, Harold had repeated cultivating crops many times, and the greatest feature was that the growth rate of crops grown using the LP farming method was considerably fast.
It was at the level of calling it bizarre. In the case of red groot, normally, it would take a little under 2 months for it to be harvested after its seeds were planted, but the ones given Life Potion could be harvested in 5 days to a week. In the game, if one planted the seeds and stayed overnight in an inn, they could harvest it the next day, but as expected, there wouldn't be such a growth rate over here.

Anyway, with this rotation like speed, Kazuki estimated that even small fields would create profits.

「Harvesting is possible in just 5 days!?」

Due to the shocking fact, even the usually calm Jake involuntarily raised his voice.
Ground-breaking, it was a discovery that could be called revolutionary.

「But, due to that speed, care should be taken to not overdo it」

「Why?」

「If cheap and high-quality goods appeared in large quantities, the market might crash. As a result, there are chances of farmhouses outside the Stokes territory getting crushed」

Even though the LP farming method was a little costlier than the traditional ones, due to the growth being fast, a large quantity could be produced in a short amount of time. If the production went on the right track, with price equal to the common ones, if production in large quantities became possible, even if trade took place with even cheaper prices, there would be profits.
Using that to not provoke resentment – that was Kazuki's true motive. More than anything, the thing that was important was protecting oneself.

If the fact that the one who invented the LP farming method and spread it out was Harold, was exposed, there were possibilities of getting resented unjustly. But if his parents, who were attached to money came to know about it, they would monopolize the LP farming method. To avoid that, Kazuki thought that going small scale and detailed, and limiting the quantity of harvested crops would be a good way to start.
And then, after it had gradually progressed, when there was some financial leeway, it would be possible to test the LP farming method on other crops too.

At present, it was known that with a ratio of 1:1 of water to Life Potion for red groot and bell tubers and also, a ratio of 7:3 with water as 7 for bluna, it would be easy to grow them, and they would also taste good.
When bluna was given 100% Life Potion, it was at a level where, if it was planted at morning, then it could be harvested at dusk. This was discarded because, when Zen took it to the kitchen, they told that it didn't taste good.

In other words, depending on the ratio of Life Potion given to the crops, there would be differences in the growth speed as well as the taste. If matters like that

were tested on common crops, then the revenue from the agricultural district would also become stable at a high level.
This time’s work could also be called as laying the groundwork to obtain that source of capital.

「Normally, it would start out by assembling a team of experts, but…….」

To do that, he would need to talk to his father. But an image of his parents, whose eyes were blinded by money, came into Kazuki’s mind.
He didn’t want to birth discord among farmhouses and he also didn’t want unnecessary resentment from other nobles. Even if it wasn’t possible to hide it until the end, he wanted to reconstruct the financial conditions to the extent of improving the financial situation of farmhouses, until they were able to procure the required amount of Life Potions by themselves.
No matter how much of a headache it was, to avoid the death flag, he had no choice but for it to become popular.

Suddenly becoming aware of it, Jake, who was listening to the explanation, was staring open-mouthed. Even Norman had a similar expression, and Zen was half-asleep, unable to keep up with the conversation.
Giving up on Zen, Kazuki wondered what was going on with the expressions of the remaining 2.

「Do you bastards have a hobby of exposing such idiotic looking faces?」

「F, forgive me. It was just that I was astonished by the contents of the talks………」

「Though I had heard about it to some extent before, I am in admiration that you have given it so much thought」

(Admiring the idea of an amateur to such an extent, inversely this makes me uneasy………)

Kazuki had no expert knowledge in economics or management.
For now, this was the material for presenting only the general framework.
From here on, it would be setting a limit and polishing out the finer details, but he was wondering whether the 2 reliable people were fine or not.

「I’ll tell this first. I don’t need a yes-man. If you find any odd points, without exceptions, give proposals. Alright?」

Or else, it would be dangerous for Kazuki's heart due to the pressure.
Those feelings went through to Norman and Jake in a different manner.

(Discovering a ground-breaking cultivation method which could overturn history at that age and yet, having the intellect to come out with a realistic political plan. Besides, not being proud and being strict on oneself, and has an insatiable desire to improve oneself)

(Not even looking at the easily obtainable money or honor, having strong feelings and deep affection to earnestly try to save the people)

–Harold is a person born with the caliber to stand above people.

Intuition close to conviction.
He was emitting the kind of charisma, where one would think of wanting to follow him.

「Well then, the final confirmation. Jake, will you act as my hands and feet?」

To that question, the intent to shake his head horizontally didn't even remain.

「I will use all the power that I possess for the sake of Harold-sama」

「If you want to be useful for me, work for the populace instead of working for me. They are the weak, who wouldn't even survive if something like that isn't done」

Arrogant until the end but always working for the weak.
That way of living was prouder than anyone else's.

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Episode 7

「If you’ve understood, begin immediately. Norman, consolidate all the things I’ve explained just now into a document in order to convince the people. If there are any obscure points or parts that worry you, without omitting anything, ask me」

「Understood」

「Jake, divide adjacent farmhouses as uniformly as possible, based on their operation scale. I will specify the area of the field required for cultivating crops, so you don’t need to consider it」

「Understood」

Since he had told them this much, then it seemed as though the rest would be taken care of by the 2 who seemed to be capable. For now, only this much can be done – thinking that, as he was leaning back on the chair, his eyes met with Zen, who was still in the room.

「………What?」

「What should I do, Harold-sama」

Zen asked, his eyes shining brightly.
But sadly, he had no work until they headed towards the site.

「Don’t do anything. Or rather, go back to your own work」

In the first place, Kazuki hadn’t called for Zen. Since he was hanging around in the room like always, Kazuki was just pushing him around.

「I have a holiday today!」

「What the hell did you come here for?」

Kicking Zen, who was giving a thumbs-up, in the back, he drove him out of the room.
In the room which was empty, he sighed deeply.

With this, the first stage was completed. All that was left was to wait for Norman and Jake to complete their preparations.

He didn’t know how much time it would take, but for now, he could be at ease for about a week.

However, just when had thought like that, a new problem came unexpectedly. That happened during dinner. Harold’s father suddenly dropped a bomb on the dining table.

「Harold, your marriage partner has been decided」

The reason why he didn’t spurt out the fruit juice which was in his mouth was because Kazuki already knew that Harold had a fiancee.
Even so, he couldn’t hide his surprise since he was spending all his time on the pile of problems which were in front of him, and he had forgotten about the existence of Harold’s fiance.

「Marriage partner? Who is it?」

Even while feeling the shamelessness inside, he asked back with a seemingly similar response.

「The daughter of the Sumeragi family. Accurately speaking, it’s only engagement, but with this, the Stokes family’s lineage will become stronger」

「Oh, That’s wonderful!」

His parents were chuckling in high spirits. Certainly, for these 2 who were for the pure-blood principle, it would be quite the good news.
The Sumeragi house was one among the noble houses who had helped in the founding of this country, and from their organization, even now, their ties to the kingdom was deep. If they were connected by blood with such a house, then the prestige of the Stokes house, who supported the pure-blood principle, would rise.

「And so, the other party is telling that, by all means, they want to meet you. We’ll head towards the Sumeragi territory soon」

Absolute lies – somehow, he stopped himself before he could tell that. But Kazuki, who had knowledge about the original work, knew that the Sumeragi side weren’t enthusiastic about this engagement.
Originally, there was an overwhelming difference in status between the Stokes house and the Sumeragi house. Even then, the reason why this engagement was

being held was because of the original work's scenario.

(Huh, Wait a sec? Perhaps, this phase is……….)

By the time the information in his head came together, an ingenious idea was formed.
Since talks about the engagement were already out, there were no mistakes that there was already some damage to the Sumeragi side. However, the damage should still be to the minimum since it was before the start of the original work, and if Kazuki interfered, the possibility of stopping the damage from expanding should be plenty. There would be some effects on the story so he wouldn't be too enthusiastic, but since it concerned human life, he decided that he couldn't go without sacrificing something.

「When do you mean by soon?」

「In another 2 to 3 days」

(Haa–!)

In that interval, he wouldn't be able to gather necessary items. Particularly, the items which could only be obtained as item drops from defeating monsters, were a problem.

Well, different from the game world where items could be bought only in limited shops, since there was economic activity in this world, there was a possibility that the items might be circulated, and if he thought about it carefully, even if he collected the necessary items, he couldn't show their effect only in the Sumeragi territory.
In that case, the best thing he could do was to write it in a letter beforehand, and send it to the Sumeragi family without his parents' knowledge.

As soon as Kazuki finished eating, he withdrew into his room, and based on his memory, he started recalling the recipe for creating a certain powder.

(Anise hisopp and fang of Gadun, Reel grass……. And what else? If I'm not mistaken, there was something that seemed like traditional Chinese medicine………)

Compounding in『Brave Hearts』was not only for creating recovery items, but also for weapons and armor and sometimes, even machines, using a vast

amount of combinations.
Even for Kazuki, who had crammed nearly all of those into his head, it was a pain to recall the details.
In the end, by the time he recalled the details of a total of 5 compounding items and wrote a letter to the Sumeragi house before he forgot, it was already dawn, and sunlight was entering through the window.

As a result, holding the letter which was written satisfyingly, as planned before, 3 days after that dinner, Kazuki, who rode in a carriage for the first time in his life, headed towards the Sumeragi territory.
The complete journey took 9 days. If they hadn't made camp, it would've been shortened by a few days, but there was the high class Stokes family's current head.

Due to something like – There are things other than camping, it was inevitable that they stayed in the best inn in the town, every single day. But it was fortunate that they didn't run into strong monsters, since they didn't travel during the night when monsters were highly active.
Kazuki didn't bother asking whether it was all right with his work, since the round-trip would take about 3 weeks.

And so, with there being no problems, other than the time spent alone with his father being great, they arrived at the Sumeragi's mansion at the end of their journey.

It's appearance was that of wooden architecture, which made one think that they were in the Japan of the olden days. Red light baskets were dangling from the eaves' edges, the sound of a bamboo fountain was ringing out from the yard and a vibrant tree with cherry blossoms was towering up. It was a place which was overflowing with Japanese-style taste.
The setting was that the Sumeragi house was succeeding the flow from the east, and so not only the mansion, but even the townscape was pure Japanese-style.
(TL – The bamboo fountain in Japanese is shika odoshi or shishi odoshi which literally translates to deer scarer, and I assume that you've all seen it in a lot of anime. Here)

「Welcome. Master and Madam have been waiting, so please, this way」

A white-haired elderly man was lying in wait for them at the main entrance.
From his attire and bearing, Kazuki felt that he was no ordinary servant.
Under his guidance, they entered the mansion.

「I somehow can’t settle down due to removing footwear inside the house. Even these things called inner-footwear」

「Since this is the culture of the Sumeragi house, please show consideration」

Next to his complaining father, Kazuki lined up the boots he had taken off, in a practiced manner.
After doing it, 「Ah, This isn’t like Harold」- he noticed.

However, since it seemed as though they didn’t notice it, he felt relieved.
After that, the elderly man finally stopped after walking through the open corridor wandering through about half the mansion.

「Master, I have brought Hayden Stokes-sama and his son, Harold-sama」

「Please, come inside」

A sombre, yet calm voice rang out from the other side of the sliding door. The old man sat on his knees, and slid the door open using both his hands.
It was a spacious Japanese-style room, with a size of about 20 tatami mats. 3 people were sitting next to each other at a wooden desk, which was placed at the center of the room.
(TL – sliding door is the traditional paper one -shoji
1 tatami/ *jō* = 1.653m^2(17.79ft^2), so 20 *jō* = 33.06m^2(355.8ft^2))

At the center was the current head of the Sumeragi house, Tasuku Sumeragi.
To his right was his wife, Koyomi Sumeragi.
They were a couple, to whom the words gentle and quiet was perfectly applicable, and they overflowed with kindness. However, at present, it looked as though their expressions were dark.

And then, the issue was the presence of the expressionless girl towards Tasuku’s left.
Black hair extending towards her shoulders, a hairpin with a pink undertone, which went well with her hair, and wearing a light-green colored long-sleeved kimono, was the Sumeragi house’s eldest daughter, Erika Sumeragi.

(TL – Long-sleeved kimono -Furisode)

(The light in her eyes are disappearing, Oi. I can’t sense any vigor……..)

With regards to her dressed up like that, it seemed as though she was a doll. She wasn’t young enough to innocently be delighted for this engagement, nor was she mature enough to hide her feelings and simply smile on the outside. But still, it seemed as though this was the result after she somehow came to terms with this situation.

But the real her was different. Erika, like her name implied, was a graceful girl who smiled like a flower.
Because Kazuki knew that, his heart tightened. It was because of him that a 10 year old girl was making such a face.
(TL – Erica is a flower – Erica Carnea)

However, again, there was nobody other than Harold who could make her stop making such a face. It would be too pitiful for her to spend 8 years like this, until she met the protagonist.

「This is the first time we are meeting, aren’t we? I am the current head of the Sumeragi house, Tasuku Sumeragi」

「……..I am Harold Stokes. Nice to meet you」

After Kazuki exchanged greetings with Tasuku, he sat on the cushion that was laid down. Unexpectedly, it seemed as though this mouth could speak in polite language.
The discussion started while he had discovered something new.

「Thank you very much for taking the trouble to come here」

「What are you talking about. It is natural」

The heads of both the houses, no matter how they really were, started conversing calmly. It didn’t seem as though, for example, due to engaged parties meeting face to face, a dangerous mood would set in which would develop into a situation where they would glare at each other.
While feeling relieved, Kazuki examines the situation. Basically, while Tausku and Hayden were rambling on, providing what seemed like lip service to each other, occasionally Koyomi would smile elegantly, which didn’t look as though it was

forced at all.

As it was an engagement that was decided by their parents due some political reason, Harold's and Erika's turn was almost non-existent. Since there was no room for them to intervene, it couldn't be helped.

「Well? Erika-chan. Harold is quite handsome, isn't he?」

「Yes, very」

Casually, Hayden asked Erika, as a joke. The reply came back in a flash, in an extremely flat voice.

「Sorry, Stokes-sama. It seems as though this girl is nervous………」

Tasuku smoothed over it, but rather than calling it nervous, it was a tone which had almost no feelings put into. Well, it was harsh to ask a child of that age to deal with the situation maturely.
Hayden, who received such a response, didn't seem to mind it. Even if Erika had clearly refused, he wouldn't have minded it.

「Well, it is natural to bewildered if one's marriage partner were to be decided at this age. Even Harold is the same」

「Yes. Since I am meeting someone as cute as Erika-san for the first time, even I am feeling nervous」

Since more than half of it was the truth, it wasn't as though he was using flattery, but differing from Erika, due to his manner of speech which seemed to have ample composure, it could be heard as flattery.
Even though his tone had changed, the similarity didn't disappear. It was as though the boy known as Harold had no relations to an attitude which was meek or modest.

「Well dear, since they have especially come here, how about leaving Harold and Erika together so that they can talk unreservedly?」

「Oo, that would be good!」

Hayden jumps at Koyomi's suggestion.
From here on, serious talks about the engagement would start. For Koyomi, it was unbearable to make her daughter, who actually hated this, listen to the talk.

This was concern, which came from her parental affection for her daughter.

「Right. Erika, show Harold-kun around for a little while. So that you would come back by around dinner time」

「………Alright. Well then, Harold-sama, this way please」

However, for Kazuki, this was a godsend*. There was no need for Kazuki himself to broach the subject to create a situation like this.
(TL – It is actually watari ni fune, which translates to a boat coming at a crossing, which is a Japanese proverb for help arriving at the correct time)

「It is an honor to be escorted by Erika-san」

Standing up, he followed Erika and left the Japanese-style room.
From here, it was a crucial moment for Kazuki.

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Episode 8

Exiting the Japanese-style room, Kazuki was lead by Erika to a garden, which was maintained very well.
Erika, who had changed to a black lacquered geta, was walking in front, while making clanking sounds.

She stopped under a large tree, which was more than 20m tall. In a view where cherry blossom petals were fluttering about like in an illusion, she turned towards Kazuki.

「Greeting you again. I am Tasuku Sumeragi's daughter, Erika Sumeragi」

「Harold Stokes」

As soon as they finished giving their names, silence descended again. Harold's speech didn't express any kind of friendly atmosphere at all.

(Or rather, when did this tone return………)

Come to think of it, he recalled that even in the original work, Harold would always speak in a harsh tone with Erika. Perhaps, he could use polite language only in front of his superiors.

「This tree is called『Sakura』and it is a flower which represents our, Sumeragi house's, hometown. It wasn't existing in these lands, but it seems as though when the feudal lord of those times migrated here, he planted the sapling that he had brought with him. It is a story of about 500 years ago, but now, it has become the symbol of the Sumeragi house」
(TL – Sakura here is in katakana)

While Kazuki was being fed up at Harold's foulmouthed tone, all of a sudden he was told about the history of the Sumeragi's hometown.
Since she was troubled by the silence, for the time being, Erika started explaining about the cherry blossom tree which was in front of her eyes. It was admirable that even though her mental state wasn't calm, her spirit to serve as a guide wasn't diminished.

Honestly speaking, it was an unsuitable topic for children to speak about frankly, but for Kazuki who was familiar with cherry blossoms, it was a suitable material for him to bite onto.

「It is different from the『Sakura』I know of」
(Tl – Sakura here is in kanji – 桜)

The name of this tree wasn’t clear in the game, but the shape of its petals and the way it was attached to the tree was different from the Somei Yoshino one could commonly see in Japan. Somehow, even the color was deeper.
So, even a type like this exists? Even though he thought of it, it wasn’t as though he would get an answer.

「Do you know about Sakura?」

Although Erika was expressionless until now, her eyes wavered slightly at his reply.

「No, it’s probably something different with a similar appearance. Well, that kind of thing doesn’t matter」

His mouth, which was in its best condition even today, bluntly cut down Erika’s question.
This was the result when he tried to just change the topic.
Being treated coldly, Erika’s expression turned grim. He didn’t know if that expression was hate or vigilance.

(Come to think of it, out of the people who appear, the only one that Erika loathes is me)

The easiest way to represent Erika, was without a doubt, as “Yamato Nadeshiko”.
Even while being the daughter of a highly distinguished noble family, she had an attitude of not discriminating anybody, no matter who it was, and let alone allies, she would smile and be gentle even towards enemies, and she also had the tolerance to quietly support the protagonist. The amount of players who were softened down by her, who would always maintain a calm bearing, were uncountable.

The one who made such a girl enraged to the point of slapping him, was none other than Harold. To make her do something like that, in a certain sense, it was

an achievement.
Although, there were some players who named Erika slapping Harold as "Reward", and they would replay that event to appreciate it.

「In other words, does that mean you hold no interest towards the Sumeragi house?」

「Interpret it as you wish」

「………Is that so. After all, the only thing that you people want is the name of the Sumeragi, right?」

「You have nothing other than the name. Aren't you mistaking it for that? Other than name, it doesn't seem as though the Stokes house is inferior. Even though you people are called as prominent and prestigious nobles, it is pathetic that you can only sit and cry inside the house」

His mouth rambled on, even to the extent of astonishing himself.
Thinking it would be convenient to be hated to some extent and spouting out a small amount of ill-mannered remarks, was a mistake.
It went past being ill-mannered and could be called as abusive. It couldn't be denied that he had gone too far.

「What do you know……….!」

Erika murmured while groaning. This was 8 years before the start of the game, and since she was still a child, it seemed as though her boiling point was quite low.
Her face was hidden since she was looking downwards, but it was obvious that she was angry. It would be bad if he fanned the flames any more.
Stopping it here at driving in the wedge for the bad impression, he held out the sealed letter to Erika.

「………What might this be?」

「Shut up and accept it. And after we leave, hand it over to your father」

「I refuse」

This was what was called as no island to cling to. Completely reaping what you sow. Turning her face away, Erika started to leave.

(TL – No island to cling to is a Japanese proverb meaning being utterly helpless)

「Ah, is that so. If you want to let the people in your territory, who are suffering, die, then do so」

To those words, she involuntarily stopped.
Because, from the way Harold spoke, it seemed as though–

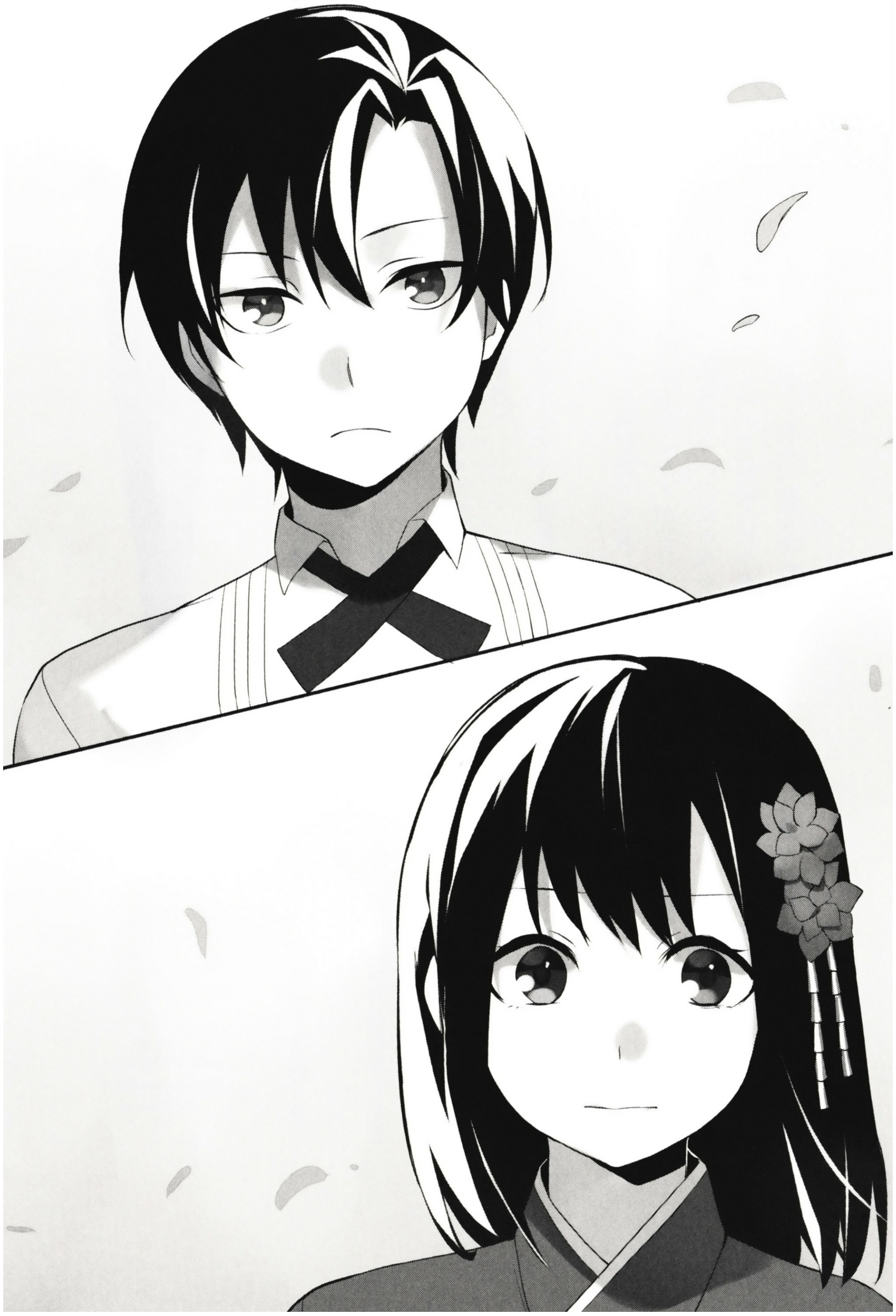
「………..There is a way to save them?」

「It can't be said that there is. But it is worth trying out」

Erika looked at the letter.
It looked as though she was hesitating, but Kazuki held the conviction that she would accept it if he told it like how he had.

In any case, the girl was kind. If put in other words, she was softhearted. She couldn't abandon people who were suffering or those who were troubled.
At any rate, it was to the extent of depicting her as being pained due to monsters being defeated, in the game.

Then, what would happen if she was informed that there may be a way to save the people, who were on their deathbed.
Even if it lacked credibility, and even if it was a suggestion from a person, who supported the pure-blood principle which ran contrary to her ideology, she couldn't simply ignore it without listening to it.



A gust of wind blew by, and the cherry blossom petals fluttered as though wrapping around the 2 people. After staring at each other briefly in silence, the one who moved first was Erika.

「It isn’t as though I believe in your words, but……..」

Even though she had a dissatisfied expression, she firmly received the letter.
For Kazuki, that was more than enough.
If it was her, she would give it to Tasuku, exactly as he had stated.

「There is no need to believe without any reason. Decide based on the results」

Well then, it wasn’t known whether Tasuku would believe in the nonsensical letter written by a 10 year old and try to implement it. But if it was a failure, then

he would think about it when the time came. He would think of another idea again.
Instead of sighing, Kazuki looked up and gazed at the cherry blossom tree and the blue sky covered in hazy clouds.

◇

The carriage, which the Stokes parent and child had gotten onto, bathed in gentle sunlight, slowly became more and more distant. Watching that, in contrast to the calm climate, dark clouds were gathering in Erika's heart.
One of the causes went without saying-Getting engaged to Harold.

Erika firmly understood that she didn't have a low social status. She hadn't even thought of getting married according to her own will, and there was no way she had someone in her heart.
But still, it wasn't as though she was mature enough to not hold any hope for her life and be content by sticking through with her selflessness with becoming a member of a house brazen enough to force an engagement by taking advantage of other people's weakness.

Much less, when she had heard that the current head of the Stokes house was for the pure-blood ideology, and that he treated people who didn't have noble blood, similar to objects.
That ideology was hard to accept no matter what, but for people like that, the blood of the Sumeragi house was extremely attractive.

She was frustrated at how the people who were discriminated against, were made the victim. It was so hateful that her power couldn't be of any help to the Sumeragi house or the people of the territory, that it was hard to endure.
But Erika, even though she was young, understood that by her going to the house following the pure-blood principle, a large amount of lives could be saved.

Without knowing even a bit of Erika's distress, Harold spoke ill of the Sumeragi house. It was an act which couldn't possibly be forgiven.

The letter received from such a person, was in Erika's hands. She just wanted to tear and throw it away according to her desire, but even though it was a verbal promise, she couldn't break it.
Dishonoring the Sumeragi, and more than anything, compared to abandoning a

chance of saving the people of the territory, who were suffering even now, she had enough spirit to swallow any amount of humiliation.

「Forgive me, Erika………」

Those words leaked out in a regretful tone from Tasuku, who was standing next to her watching the carriage leave. He couldn't honestly be delighted at making someone, who she didn't even want to be with, marry her.

Even so, if he had to make a mortifying choice to protect the lives and livelihood of several tens of thousands of people, then it was his duty as the head of the house to do so.

「Please don't mind it, Father. This is also for the Sumeragi and the people who live here」

There were no lies in those feelings.
But right now, she wanted some time to compose her heart.

「Father, this. Harold-sama asked me to give it to you after they left」

Taking out the letter, she held it out to Tasuku.

「From Harold-kun?」

While thinking that he might have been instructed by his parents to greet them for the engagement, he received the letter. Even if it was so, even handing it via Erika, Harold had specified an odd timing for it to be given to him.

「Then, I will return to my room」

「Ah, rest at ease」

Bowing towards Tasuku, who had a sympathetic smile, Erika left from the place with a quick pace.
Tasuku and Koyomi were truly concerned in their hearts. The kindness from them was all the more painful.

Looking at his daughter who was behaving in a firm manner, Tasuku condemned himself for making her bear such a heavy burden.
Even more, he was thinking whether there were any other methods, which would end up not hurting her.

「……….There’s no use even if I think about it now」

Everything, this situation was all because of his powerlessness. And because of that, he had forced Erika and the people to carry a heavy burden.
He didn’t even feel like mocking himself.

With a gloomy heart, he opened the letter from Harold.
The starting of the letter had a seasonal greeting, which was unlike something written by a child. With that itself, Tasuku didn’t have a bad impression of Harold.
But as he went on reading the letter, the complacency to think about such things was blown away.

Spontaneously, power started filling his hand which was holding the letter, and by the time he had finished reading it, the whole letter was deeply wrinkled.

「Is anyone there!? Call Kiryuu!」

Tasuku’s loud voice rang out throughout the whole mansion. Maybe being flustered by an unusual thing, the servants who were working in the mansion hurriedly searched for Kiryuu.
Soon, the figure of the person who was called for, appeared while making noise due to walking in a hurry. It was the elderly man, who was waiting for Harold and his father, at the gate.

「What is it, Master」

「We can’t speak here. Come」

The place which Tasuku chose was the office, where nobody was present.
There, he made Kiryuu read the letter from Harold.

As soon as Kiryuu finished reading, Tasuku started talking.

「That letter is from Harold-kun. What do you think?」

「……….Frankly speaking, I think this is suspicious」

「Agreed. But even if this is true or false, there is no benefit for the Stokes family」

「If so, then is it the work of a third party? At the very least, it is hard to think that it was written by the boy himself」

「At the most, he was just used as a go-between, is it」

That line of thinking was the most understandable answer. Because, the contents of the letter wasn't something that a mere 10 year old child could write.
But in that case, the biggest question wasn't cleared.

「The problem is, whose work it is. If it were some supporter of the Sumeragi, there would be no need to choose such a roundabout and unreliable method」

「Then, it's the work of someone who is against the Stokes house?」

「And that too, someone who is close enough to Harold-kun to make him accept their request, or someone who could manipulate him to any extent. To a degree of brainwashing him」

If that wasn't the case, there was no way that the letter would reach Tasuku, and even the condition written couldn't be fulfilled.
The aim of the mastermind was either the fall of the Stokes house or something that came after it. To make conjectures about it, the information was too less at the present point of time.

「It might be bad for the Sumeragi house if we try to pry into them, but……….」

「If we do that, compared to the things we might gain, the risks are too high. Offering a few words, right now, the Sumeragi are in a predicament. If we watch carefully, even without hurrying, it will take the form we desire」

It was as Kiryuu said. As long as a solution wasn't found, eventually the Sumeragi house would disappear without financial support.

「In other words, if it is that the sender of this letter doesn't want for that to happen,………」

「It is highly possible that the contents written down are true」

This wasn't a concrete solution.
But if it was effective, the time required to explore for a solution would be produced. In that case, as written down in the letter, it would be possible to cancel the engagement and let Erika be free.

「Kiryuu, gather the required materials at once. And after explaining the risks, employ those who still have hope」

There was no definitive proof that the contents of the letter were true. But it was the only light that could be seen in the fog.
Even if he was dancing on someone’s palm, Tasuku decided to gamble on this chance.

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Episode 9

Coming back to the Stokes mansion after about 3 weeks, there were no signs of any particular change. If there was a change, it was that Jake had started cultivating crops on his own using the LP farming method in his home garden. It seemed as though he was still dubious after only listening to it.

However, looking at it being effective, Jake, who had discovered hope in the LP farming method to break-out of the difficult economic situation, energetically started putting his efforts towards its practical implementation.
Since Norman was also skillfully moving under the surface, it still wasn't perceived by his parents. It could be said that until here, everything was going according to the plan.

And then, on a certain day after about 10 days had passed after returning back from the Sumeragi territory, when the practical implementation of the LP farming method was imminent, Kazuki, who was performing his daily training, received a notification that a visitor had come for him.

「A visitor for me?」

「Yes, that's true」

Even if such a thing was told all of a sudden, Kazuki had no idea about who it might be. As expected, even he didn't know about the relationships Harold might have had in his childhood.

「The visitor's name is?」

「It is Erika Sumeragi-sama」

Hearing the name Norman spoke of, Kazuki stopped swinging the sword.

(Why has Erika come………)

Please pardon me from any troubling situations during this strangely busy time right before the practical implementation of the LP farming method-this was Kazuki's mental state.
In the first place, for what had she come. There was no way she would come to meet the one who had been so abusive during their first meeting.

If he thought about it, it must be some kind of response concerning the letter. He couldn’t understand as to why Erika was selected as the messenger.
At any rate, even if he thought about it while holding the sword in the backyard, he wouldn’t be able to make any sense of it.

「Send her to the terrace」

Hayden wasn’t here since he was at work, but his mother, Jessica, was at home. Even today, since she was holding an elegant noble-styled friendly meet in the party room, and though the probability of an encounter would be low if they went to the indoor guest room, since it concerned the letter, he chose a place where it would be difficult for there to be any hindrances.
Truthfully, his room would be the optimal place, but for example, if all of a sudden he brought his fiancee into his room, it would give rise to unwanted misunderstandings, so he showed prudence. He knew that there was no way 10 year old children could cause any misunderstanding, but he took precautions just in case.

For the time being, Kazuki washed his sweat with water, and after changing his clothes, he went towards the terrace.
There, was the appearance of Erika enjoying the Black tea brewed by the waiter of the Stokes house.

Different from the other day’s Kimono, today’s outfit was that of a Hakama that students wore. It was a scene where it was considerably imbalanced for her, who was wearing pure Japanese-style clothes, to be sitting on a Western wooden chair.

「What did you come here for?」

While sitting down facing her, Harold asked in a really displeased voice.
If it was regarding the letter, there was no way he could let someone hear it, so for now, he made the waiter fall back by waving his hand.

「In this situation, normally shouldn’t the first sentence be “Sorry for making you wait” ?」

For Kazuki, it was his intention to tell something similar to that. It was just that the words and the nuance didn’t reflect it at all.
It might have leaked out that he considered it to be a pain to talk her.

「Unlike you, I’m not free. Be grateful that I actually showed up」

「Uh……….Certainly, it is my fault for visiting all of a sudden, but………」

Erika was disheartened at being hit by sound reasoning.
Even though his point was correct, since the other person was a child, he felt as though he was bullying her.

「Fuh, well, fine. What is your business?」

Since his conscience was pricked, Kazuki quickly continued the conversation.
Sensing Harold’s mood, Erika put up a dignified atmosphere in an instant.

「First of all, on behalf of the Sumeragi family, I want to thank you. On this occasion, thank you for saving many people」

Erika deeply lowered her head. Saved, which meant that after creating the compounding item that Kazuki had written in the letter, they had actually used it and it was effective.

Tasuku had received the letter about 20 days ago. If he included the time lag, it meant that he had tested it as soon as Kazuki left.
Tasuku had taken action quicker than he had anticipated.

「To jump at a counterfeit like that, it seems as though even the Sumeragi are considerably cornered」

Towards Harold who was sneering, Erika’s expression didn’t break down.

「It is as Harold-sama says. At present, the Sumeragi don’t have any method」

「Then, I will sell that favor for a high price. But you are mistaken」

「What do you mean?」

「The thing I suggested to you bastards was just a makeshift solution. It doesn’t solve anything fundamentally, and there might be side-effects」

In the game, it was just choosing ingredients and compounding them, but in reality, the proper quantity should be found by running many trials and many tests should be conducted to find the correct ratio. With all that, Kazuki didn’t think that there would an effect so fast.
Adding onto that, he had absolutely no knowledge of things which weren’t

depicted in the game like whether there would be side effects due to intake of large amounts or due to taking it for a long period of time, or the degree of side effects if they occured.

Naturally, he had informed Tasuku about these things in the letter.
The Sumeragi might have been cornered to the extent of testing it out, even though it had such huge risks.

「In other words, Harold-sama's medicine won't cure them completely, is it?」

「If the degree of the symptoms is less, complete recovery might be possible, but for patients whose symptoms are severe, it is impossible. And I don't have any intention to care about them to such an extent」

Because, the ones who would solve that was Liner's protagonist crew, and it would also be the event which would cause Erika to join the protagonist party.

It might seem to be cold, but Erika also understood.
Even if they were engaged, after all, it was a political marriage. As long as the Stokes house did their duty by the least amount, that is, by providing goods and assisting in funding the Sumeragi, the Stokes house would be able to maintain their reputation.
And yet, Harold expressly–

(Made it………? The "medicine"?)

The question that passed through Erika's mind.
That is, when had Harold created that medicine.

It was impossible that it was done after the engagement to Erika had been decided. Even she knew that it was impossible for her to develop a medicine in just a few days, when she had no expert knowledge in that field.

Then, since he only had the knowledge, it wasn't created by Harold?
Previously, when Erika told-「Harold-sama's medicine」, he neither denied nor affirmed it.
Harold, till the end, only took the stance of "suggested a makeshift solution".

But still, it was hard to think that Harold would know about an effective method when, even all of the Sumeragi put together had not been able to find it.
Even assuming that that was the case, if he had enough clinical knowledge to

verify the effects even to a small extent, there would have been a considerable amount of materials or books remaining. It was also ridiculous that he had no idea about what the side-effects would be.

(In that case, how in the world……..?)

「Is that all?」

The thing that interrupted Erika, who was deep in thought, was Harold's voice, where he didn't even try to conceal his annoyance.
The mood that he really wanted to send her away was transmitted.

「There's more. I have been entrusted with a letter from father to Harold-sama」

「Hand it over」

As expected, it seemed that Erika was selected as a messenger.
Tasuku might have decided that just a written letter would lack in showing gratitude, and so he had thought of personally showing his gratitude.

While sympathizing with Erika for a bit, thinking that she must have been unwilling to come here, Kazuki looked over the letter from Tasuku.

The contents were as he had expected.
The effects of the medicine, regarding the cases where there were side-effects, there were no great problems, but they would continue to carefully observe the transition, and words of gratitude towards Harold – this was what was written in the letter.

Well, at present, that was the extent to which they could report.
Looking at the letter, if he conveyed his thoughts of watching the rest carefully to Tasuku, then there would be no need for him to interfere any longer.

(Nn?)

Casually thinking that there were only 2 sheets of paper, he noticed that there was 1 more sheet. It had a P.S. at the beginning.

『P.S.

As you know, since there is a strange situation going on now in the Sumeragi territory, I'm extremely busy trying to find a solution.

Since this is an incident with no precedents, we don't when an unforeseen situation may rise up.
And so, though it pains me to ask any more from you, I have a request. I'm truly sorry, but could you please take care of Erika in the Stokes house for a short while. I may be disqualified as the head of a house to interpose with my personal feelings, but as a father who is concerned about his only daughter–』

Kazuki, who had read until that part, moved his eyes away from the letter. Thinking that he might have strained his eyes, after rubbing the inner corner of his eyes, he looked at the letter and read it again from the beginning.
But even though he did that, there were no changes to the words asking for his assistance to keep Erika safe.

He endured from holding his head with his hands and falling flatly on the table, but still, the voice that was squeezed out from him contained deep resentment.

「What is the meaning of this………」

「What is the matter?」

In silence, Kazuki put the sheet on which the P.S. was written, in front of Erika. After reading it, Erika spoke as though she was extremely surprised, in an indifferent tone.

「Oh, this is troubling. Even though I am the fiancee, I would be troubling many people by living under the same roof」

「………..Oi」

「But the carriage which brought me here has already left. There is no way other than being saved by Harold-sama's compassion」

「Oi Bastard」

「Yes, what is it?」

A grinning Erika. This was the first time she had shown a full-faced smile.

「You have quite the guts」

「I am honored to receive your praise」

To Harold's sarcastic remark, Erika, with a refreshing face, too replied with a

sarcastic remark. This matter wasn't only Tasuku's judgement, but it seems as though she also knew about it.
That is to say, Erika was trying to stay here with some kind of goal.

It wasn't simply because they were engaged. He had informed Tasuku of a method where Erika wouldn't have to marry into the Stokes house.
Well, that was only if Tasuku believed in the contents of the letter, but he couldn't guess as to why there would be a need to send Erika over even if he didn't believe in the letter.

Adding onto that, Kazuki was baffled at Erika's behavior.
Certainly, in the game it was shown that she was playful and would play small pranks, but she didn't have the personality to reply back with spite, even if it was just in words.
It would be fine if it was just because she still didn't have a mature mental state, but that gap was more than enough to perplex Kazuki.

「I don't have any duty to accept such a one-sided proposal」

Even though all the requests from higher rank nobles were almost like orders, Kazuki rejected it without any hesitation.
Considering Tasuku's personality and the Sumeragi's current condition, he judged that it wasn't a problem.

If due to this, even if the relationship between the Sumeragi and the Stokes grew worse, that by itself would be the development Kazuki was hoping for.
Eventually, on the occasion when the engagement was cancelled, it would be fine if it came as a boost.

「You're cold, aren't you. Even though you have saved the people of another territory, you would treat your fiancee in such a blunt manner」

Erika made a sad expression, as though to show it off.
This was exactly a "made up" expression, and unlike the time when she was dejected, Kazuki's heart wasn't moved by the slightest.

「That was estimated as selling a costly favor. But for this matter, the compensation for me is too less」

「Is that so. If you are saying that much, I can't keep requesting Harold-sama any more than this」

Erika, who stood up quickly, once again bowed deeply towards Harold.

「Once again, I express my gratitude towards Harold-sama. For saving the people of the Sumeragi, really, thank you very much」

Her bow was polite ,to the extent of making him think that if they were sitting on tatami, she would have bowed while pressing 3 fingers of each hand on the floor. He felt as though he seen the true Erika, and also felt that she truly thought about the people. But just because of that, he wasn’t the least bit willing to let her freeload.

「I will collect this loan in grand proportions at a later time. While you have the time, increase the number of cards you can break out as much as possible」

「Much obliged to the degree of your consideration. Well then, excuse me」

Leaving those words behind, Erika left the Stokes mansion in an unfaltering stride.
He felt suspicious at how awfully easily she withdrew. And come to think of it, how is she planning to go home without the carriage-he thought of that question only after some time had passed.

He would come to know the answer to that question a few hours later, from Hayden’s mouth.

Episode 10

While Kazuki was reading the report written by Jake at dusk, he was called by Hayden, who had come back to the mansion.
Thinking -No way , and listening to the servant who had come to call Harold, he carried his legs towards Hayden's study.

Looking at Hayden's face, who had been waiting there, the bad premonition changed into conviction. This was because Hayden, who normally had a stern expression most of the times, seemed to be in a good mood.
He started talking as soon as Harold went inside the room.

「Rejoice, Harold. I have good news」「」

「Good news?」

Although Kazuki knew what Hayden would tell, with an attitude as though he was listening to it for the first time, he asked.
Though it was sad, he couldn't help it.

「A notification from Tasuku-dono reached today. For a short while, Erika-jou will be staying in the Stokes house」

As expected-thought Kazuki.
For Hayden, it seemed as though Erika freeloading was already a decided fact.
Even for the Sumeragi, from the start this must have been their true motive.
But still, Kazuki tried to resist.

「I'm not enthusiastic, living together with that girl」

「No need to be shy. Because, the relationship between you and Erika-jou has officially been recognized by both families」

But Hayden misunderstood that he was feeling shy. Maybe because he was cheerful, there was no sign of him paying attention to Harold's words properly.
Even though he tenaciously tried after that, without being able to overturn the desicion, eventually Kazuki unwillingly went to welcome Erika.

The next day, Kazuki went towards the East entrance which connected the Stokes territory to the highway, to welcome Erika. It seemed that the plan was

that they would arrive early in the morning, but since she had shown herself yesterday, probably they had lodged in a nearby inn.
Kazuki, in a gloomy mood, was being rocked inside the carriage.

(Rather, isn't the schedule too tight?)

Even though the time it would take for a one-way trip should have been around 6 to 7 days even if they had hurried, since they had arrived the very next day, either they had no intention to listen to the reply or they knew that Hayden would accept. Well, it was probably the latter.
Either way, the possibility of this being a development not present in the original work, was high. The origin of this was without a doubt, the letter written by Kazuki.

In other words, you reap what you sow-while getting depressed, before he knew it they had arrived at the East entrance.
When he got down from the carriage with heavy steps, which seemed though he had shackles around his legs, Erika and an unknown woman diagonally behind her, were standing there.

「To be welcomed by Harold-sama personally, it is an honor」

「Ha, even though you don't mean it」

Even today, starting to destroy human relations, Harold-mouth.
About 3 months had passed with him being together with this mouth, and Kazuki was getting to the point of being in admiration at the number of variations in sneering.

While feeling his useless growth, Kazuki turned his gaze towards the woman behind Erika.
Her age must have been in the later half of her tens to the mid-twenties. With a large white ribbon, her chestnut-colored hair was tied up in a bundle and reached until her waist, which left an impression.

「Who is that?」

「Juno, my attendant. She will look after my daily necessities during the stay」

「I am Juno ～」

Stretching out the words, Juno bowed with sluggish movements. Coupled with a limp smile, she was a woman with a calm atmosphere.
And Kazuki didn’t know her. That is, she was a character who hadn’t appeared in the original work.

「I’m warning you again, I don’t have the time to look after you bastards. Staying here is your decision, but just don’t get in my way」

Since he didn’t know the other party’s objective or Juno’s identity, for now, he nailed that down.
Visitors coming at the time when the practical implementation of the LP farming method was just about to begin, as much as possible, Kazuki wanted to eliminate uncertain factors.

The 2 people accepted Harold’s sharp words without getting perturbed.

「I’ll keep it in mind」

「Understood ～」

(If you have seriously understood it, can’t you just go back………)

Even if he complained about it, since Erika had also come here because she couldn’t go against her house’s circumstances, there were no methods by which he could turn them back.
In that case, it would be prudent to thoroughly avoid them.

However, there was no way that his wish would come true so easily.
Kazuki, who had returned to the mansion with them, in silence the whole way, was attacked by ruthless words.

「To show gratitude for the other day, show Erika-chan around the town tomorrow. Because, escorting a lady is also an ability required by a noble. You won’t lose anything by starting to practice from now itself」

Needless to say, it was a suggestion from Hayden.
That in itself was troublesome enough, but with Erika being Erika, answering with -「Thank you for your consideration」 as though showing good will and accepting it, Kazuki couldn’t help but be at a loss for words.

Moving around due to the incident related to Erika in this long day, Kazuki was

tired.
But it seemed as though when it passed through the filter called Harold, it changed into anger.

「The face you’re making is more scary than usual. If you’re like that, won’t your fiancee will become afraid of you?」

Coming inside the room, as soon as Zen saw Harold’s face, he talked bluntly. It was amazing that he could talk without any hesitation to a noble making such a face.

「That fiancee is the reason. Really, so annoying……..」

「What are you so dissatisfied about? Even though she is quite a cute girl」

「Is that so? I came to know about your tastes」

「You don’t understand anything! It’s a terrible misunderstanding, all right!? I prefer Juno-san more!」

Being falsely accused, Zen was frantically trying to deny it. As far as Kazuki was concerned, as long as Zen wasn’t a Shotacon, he didn’t care about what Zen’s tastes were.
And the reason why Zen knew about this topic was because, as soon as Erika had arrived, Hayden had gathered all the people in the mansion, and in a grand manner, he had introduced them as Harold’s fiancee and her attendant. Maybe he had wanted to make it an established fact, but for Kazuki, it was simply a public execution.

Incidentally, 90% of the gazes which fell onto Erika, who was introduced as the fiancee, were filled with pity.
And there, was the faithful representation of their evaluation of the Stokes family including Harold.

「Gyaa gyaa – Stop clamoring and go call Norman and Jake. I need to adjust the plans for tomorrow onwards」

「Really, I like a grown woman, all right!?」

Zen left Harold’s room, denying until the end, and while he was searching all around the mansion, Erika and Juno were also racking their brains.

The cause was none other than Harold.

「I had heard about it, but he seems to be quite a naughty kid ～」

Looking at it from Juno's age, it wouldn't be wrong to think about him as being somewhat impudent, but still settling it with only "naughty" was the extent of Juno's tolerance.
However, the main problem wasn't Harold's obnoxious behavior.

「Father told that Harold-sama is either connected to or is possibly being used by the hidden person, but……..」

「From his personality, you can't think of him listening to someone obediently ～」

Then, the possibility that Harold had become a puppet before he realized it, became higher. Making him submissive would be a considerably difficult task.

Conversely, if that behavior was acting and he was supporting the hidden person, Tasuku had suspected that by yesterday's stage, there would have been contact with this side by some method. To make it easy, they had contacted Harold when the head had been absent, at a timing when it would be hard for any interferences, fully knowing that it was rude, provocating as though to flaunt.
But the result was a miss. This made the situation even more complex.

Tasuku thought that if Harold was a puppet or even if he was moving by his own will, his objective was to either damage the Stokes or to help the Sumeragi. Therefore, proposing for an alliance to join their hands together or warning them to not get in the way, whatever it was, he had wanted some kind of action from the other side.
But the other party was still silent, even now.

Since the other party's objective wasn't clear yet, even the Sumeragi couldn't just simply sit and twiddle their thumbs. It could also turn out to be bad to simply be under the impression that they were allies and then undergo a painful experience.
For that reason, Tasuku sent Juno to investigate it.

Erika freeloading was a smoke screen for the sake of Juno being able to infiltrate naturally, in other words, nothing more than a decoy. Erika also knew about this. The objective this time and her own role, Erika understood them perfectly.

There was only 1 thing that was unknown to her. That was, the despicable possibility that Harold, without the slightest relation to his own will, was being brainwashed.
If that was the truth–

「This might perhaps require quite some effort ～」

With a sigh not audible to Erika, Juno took out a dark device from inside her sleeve, and rang it out with a ‘Kashan’.

Episode 11

As though to sweep away the atmosphere which was a little heavy, Juno changed the topic.

「By the way Erika-sama, what do you plan to do for the date tomorrow ～?」

「Naturally, I'll go. Since it is the perfect chance to get into contact with Harold-sama」

Erika showed her spirit by clenching both her fists with a「Mun!」near her torso. When Harold told them not to approach him as soon as they met, she was flustered as to what she had to do, but a chance came her way due to Hayden's statement. Although Erika didn't feel good to get on with Hayden's proposal, she couldn't let it get away.

「Then, it is a must for you to dress up ～. And in that case, how about wearing Western-style clothes which you rarely wear ～」

「There's no reason to be so enthusiastic about it……….」

Juno was cheering her on since this was a date, but the partner was that Harold. It was hard to think that the situation would turn out to be that romantic.
Practically, it would just be to the level of lightly going around the inner district. More than a date, it would be more fitting to call it an inspection.

「That won't do ～. A maiden should be charming no matter what the time ～」

Like an elder sister, Juno was advocating about how a maiden should be, but rather those words should have come from Erika.
Even though it couldn't be helped during work, spending even the day off in cooking wear, Erika couldn't help but think how a young maiden could dress like that. In Erika's memories, there wasn't a single time where Juno wasn't wearing cooking wear.
If she wanted to remonstrate her about how maiden should be, the persuasiveness was almost non-existent.
(TL – Cooking wear – kappōgi , you know, she's wearing it on the cover)

「How about you yourself dressing fashionably once in a while? Even though you're beautiful, it's such a waste」

「Fu Fu Fu ～, that is a strategy ～. At the critical moment, with the appeal of me being different from normal, I'll catch the other party's heart ～」

「Then, even I'll keep it in reserve until the critical moment」

「Eeeh ～, it's your first date, alright ～? If it goes well, you might be able to make Harold-sama fall for you , alright ～?」

「He shouldn't be a person who would bend down to another by something of that level」

No matter what, Erika couldn't imagine a Harold who would be soft on a girl. But it was easy to imagine him hurling abusive words at her without any mercy, even if she went all dressed up.

「Yesterday, I found such a cute one piece dress ～. Wear it, Erika-sama ～!」

「When did you buy such a thing……..」

Juno took out a one piece dress with frills from inside the luggage, and asked Erika. That appeal went past wanting to maintain a maiden's dignity or ensnaring Harold, and it was just her personal wish to see Erika wear the dress.

「Juno, we haven't come here to play around. Even you should know that, right?」

「Mmmm, it's a pity ～」

Deciding that there was no more room for negotiations, Juno returned the dress to the luggage.
Of course, it wasn't a serious exchange. Juno did it intentionally to break the mood, so as to reduce Erika's nervousness.
And because she had guessed that, even Erika didn't show too strong an interest in it, but there was no way she could keep on being relaxed.

「Then, let us return to the real issue ～. I'll tell you about the points you need to keep in mind when in contact with Harold-sama ～」

「Right, please」

Under a single roof, the two’s motives intersect. Probing around for each other’s true intentions, the lock on the gun was removed.

◇

Kazuki was forcefully asked to play the role of a guide for Erika, but to accomplish this mission, he had a huge flaw. It was that he hardly knew anything about the town, where he needed to act as the guide.

In the first place, the Stokes territory was only described in a part of some conversation and in an event scene, and since in the actual game it wasn’t even inscribed on the map, if Norman hadn’t given him the map he wouldn’t have been able to grasp the accurate position of it.
And since Kazuki had been spending all his time on avoiding the flag for the past 3 months, the number of times he had gone out to the town could be counted on the fingers of a single hand. That too, his travel had only been stopping by the temple, and he had never gone even once for shopping or sightseeing.
Rather, it was at the level where he himself wanted to be guided around.

However, Kazuki decided to treat it as a chance.
Kazuki didn’t know anything about the town, but it wasn’t known whether Harold knew anything about it or not. If there were any places Harold frequented, and if it became that he didn’t know about them, it would be suspicious.

But this time, he had the excuse of being restricted to “Showing Erika around the town”. It wouldn’t be unnatural for him to ask about the town, if he took the stance of wanting to know about places suitable to guide someone to rather than for his own enjoyment. Thinking that his hypothesis might be correct, Kazuki successfully procured information from the people in the mansion, indirectly.

(Well, it’s not like I can make use of it though……….)

From the start, he had no intention to guide Erika properly since he didn’t want to raise her affection points. It was just about how he would be able to firmly secure the chance of obtaining information which might become useful in the future.
Even so, this situation was a little off of his anticipation.

「Uh, um Harold-sama……….」

Erika awkwardly called out to Kazuki (Harold).
She was genuinely confused.

「What?」

「……….No, it’s nothing」

To Harold’s reply, which seemed as though he was fed up, Erika kept quiet without another word. The insides of the carriage was dominated by an awkward atmosphere.
The cause of it was outside the carriage, due to the residents of the town.

She noticed the abnormality when they first got down from the carriage.
No, the atmosphere had probably changed as soon as they had entered the town.

The thing that was there was silence, quiet enough to hurt their ears.
If Kazuki had to pick a situation similar to this from his memories, it came close to the moment when he had frozen up in junior high school, when the guidance counsellor, who was the gym teacher and who was feared by all the students, had found items banned by school regulations spread out in the classroom after school.
And in the gym teacher in this case was Harold.

As soon as Harold’s figure appeared, people stopped moving, and when he walked, as though to avoid him, the crowd split. The faces of shopkeepers who were called out became pale due to fear, and the looks of the residents who were examining the situation from afar, were filled with clear hostility.
Anyway, the town wrapped up in a bizarre silence was uncomfortable. That attitude started completely scraping away Kazuki’s mental state.

(Neglecting the rumor that I killed Clara became a disadvantage……….)

Regarding that, even Kazuki had thought of doing something. But ensuring the safety of Clara and Colette, and also wanting to avoid the problematic situation of discord rising up with his parents, he couldn’t think of any measures which would be effective.
The result was this.

Looking at how much Harold, and also the Stokes house was loathed in front of her own eyes, Erika was also left speechless.
Since they didn’t know about Erika, it could be said that their reaction was obvious since she was together with Kazuki (Harold). Well, since it would soon be officially announced that Erika was Harold’s fiancée, their looks would change to be like the ones from the servants, filled with pity.

That said, if they strolled around the city any more than this, he felt that he would lose more than what he would gain. Mainly, the mental portion.
They had gone around the town for about a little more than an hour, and Kazuki was almost at his limits.

「This is enough already. We’re going back」

「………..Alright」

Looking to be somewhat in low spirits, Erika nods. Her face expressed a weariness which wasn’t small.
The cause was that she was continuously exposed to the looks containing hostility from the townfolk.

Receiving affection from her parents, and also receiving affection and respect from the people near her and the people of the Sumeragi territory, it was the first time in her life that she experienced being showered with feelings of disgust and hate.
She didn’t even think that it would be such a powerful feeling.

Therefore, she didn’t even have the will to resist Harold’s words. She chose to head back as she was told.
There were no conversations between the 2 as they went back towards the Stokes’ mansion.

「You came back fast ～」

Juno called out to Erika, who had returned very fast.
But she didn’t inquire about it.
Because, Juno had been observing the whole time from a different location.
And so, she grasped the general circumstances.

「I had heard that the support for the Stokes house from the populace was low, but I didn't think that it was to such an extent」

In a tired voice, Erika spilled that out.
Speaking honestly, although it was little, she felt that she was in danger.

「Certainly, that type of hate isn't normal ～. Well, as far as the talks are concerned, it is obvious ～」

The talks Juno had heard from the servants and the rumors flowing around in the district were pretty awful. Especially, almost all the profits of the populace was being extorted as tax, and the amount of people who were being made to forcefully work until they could just maintain their livelihood weren't less.
They were even robbed of their energy to cause a revolt, and conversely compared to the nobles with the same level of territory and economic power, the Stokes had huge investments in their military. And due to that, the lives of the populace were becoming even more severe. With this, even if they were to cause a rebellion, it was apparent that they would be dying in vain.

「By the looks of it, it seems as though investigating the internal affairs went well」

「That is, obviously ～」

If the people of the mansion were asked about a single thing, 10 or 20 topics would come back. They seemed to be hated to quite an extent.
But, included within those, was information which couldn't be ignored no matter what.

「It's just that, there's some worrying information ～」

「Information which is worrying, is it?」

「Yes ～」

That was something where she couldn't help but doubt her own ears, and without even thinking she had asked – 「Isn't it some kind of mistake ～?」. But she had gotten enough evidence for her to believe it.
She had some scruples about telling it to Erika, but by doing so, she couldn't ignore the possibility of exposing her to danger, so Juno opened her mouth.

「Actually, it seems recently, Harold-sama burnt a servant and their family to death, using magic ～」

「–Eh?」

Without being able to process the words conveyed by Juno, Erika leaked out her breath in a daze.

「It seems that the people who were killed were a woman named Clara, who was a servant of the mansion, and her daughter, Colette-chan ～」

「W, wait, Juno! Is that the truth? Isn't it just a rumor…………」

「There is a possibility of that, but when different people were asked separately, almost identical testimonies were obtained ～. It doesn't seem to be totally unfounded gossip ～」

「Such a…………」

Harold's mouth was bad, and even his attitude was oppressive. Erika herself felt that he looked down on others, held prejudice against them and avoided them himself.
And yet, Harold showed them the hope to save the people of the Sumeragi territory.
Even if he had had his own intentions in doing so, that fact wouldn't shake.

That was why, deep down, Erika had thought that Harold was different from his parents.
To the extent that Juno's words brought about not a small amount of shock.
Both of Erika's hands which were covering her mouth, started trembling.

「I'll continue investigating secretly, but refrain from being with Harold-sama alone from now on ～. Since we don't know what might happen ～」

「………..Okay, I'll be careful」

「It's alright Erika-sama ～. I'm here ～」

As though comforting a baby, in a gentle voice, Juno cheered Erika up. As though persuading that as long as she was there, Erika would be absolutely safe.
But still, Erika's quivering didn't stop for a while.

Episode 12

「How is the cultivation going?」

「I have confirmed that the cultivation is progressing smoothly at all the 6 locations. The harvest amount is also roughly as assumed」

「Then, I want to expand it as soon as possible, but……..」

「Regretfully, if we enlarge the scope of it any more than this, we won't have enough manpower」

「And if it isn't inspected, farmhouses which selfishly start their own cultivation due to being dazzled by the profits will also appear」

It had been 2 weeks since the start of trial run for the implementation of LP farming, and Kazuki, while confirming the results with Norman and Jake, was discussing about the prospects from here on out with them.
The place was obviously Harold's room. Recently, he was seldom alone in the room. Anyone out of Norman, Jake and Zen being in the room became numerous.

「I can't do anything about the deficiency in manpower. Isn't there anybody else in this mansion we can use?」

「It is difficult in the present condition. If we ask Elias or Saxon to cooperate, it will just be a temporary measure……….」

Norman raised up the names of the 2 soldiers who helped in the plan to rescue Clara.
But asking them to go to the agricultural district for inspection on top of their original work, it wasn't very realistic. As Norman himself had stated, it would just become a temporary measure.

「Tsk, then how about I hire people from the outside…………?」

「From the outside, is it?」

「For example, if I ask my father that I want personal aides…………No, that'll be no good. If it's some guy recommended by father, moving around will become even more harder」

Jake stopped Kazuki (Harold), who seemed to be immersed while murmuring to himself.

「Harold-sama, first I want to continue the report」

「Nn? Ah, the matter about the soil」

「Yes. Regarding the soil of the testing field, no huge changes were observed」

In short, the testing field was the field present in Jake's house. He had been cultivating nothing but the 3 types of vegetable there.
The thing he had wanted to confirm was whether problems related to the soil would arise when they did this over a long period of time or when they used a large amount of LP. If due to this, the soil withered away and if it couldn't be used a field for farming anymore, they would need to suspend the use of LP immediately.

「Including this time's, how many rotations has it been?」

「It'll be red groot 7 times, bell tubers 6 times and bluna 11 times. I even had the cooks sample them regularly, but there were no differences in the taste」

「The notice isn't bad, but the number of trials is too less. Continue the cultivation testing and observe the progression. And then………..」

Like this, it became regular for Kazuki to keep them company once in few days and working hard to grasp the current circumstances. Although he did have the sense of fulfillment he hadn't experienced in his student days, even now his future was full of troubles.
And since he was using his head in a completely different way from how he used it during classes in high school or university, maybe as a recoil, his body started demanding to go rowdy.

And so, after finishing the discussion, holding the sword, Kazuki carried his legs towards the completely familiar opening in the forest expanding behind the mansion, which they had used for the plan to rescue Clara.
It was the only place where he could swing the sword with all of his strength.

As soon as Kazuki arrived, he lightly loosened his body and immediately

commenced his normal routine.
The 3 hit combo of slashing downwards diagonally from above, cutting upwards, slicing while rotating.

But the sharpness of the swing and the speed of the sword had reached to a level which couldn't be compared to when he had just started training. As though it would slice apart the air itself, a swordplay which would overwhelm those who saw it.
But Kazuki's (Harold's) sword technique didn't stop only at that.

Closing his eyes, he calmed his breath and sharpened his nerves.
It became silent and as though to break it, Kazuki started moving.

Within a second, he had unleashed the 3 hit combo, similar to the one before.The difference was in the next part.
The blade which was swung out due to the rotating slash was clad in –Lightning.

「『Raijin(Thunder God)』」

As though in concurrence with that word, the instant the blade stabbed the ground, a bright electric current was fired.
With Kazuki at the center, 8 streaks of electricity attacked the surroundings. One gouged the ground out, one scorched a rock, one broke a tree trunk.

The reach of the streak was about 3 meters. Kazuki fired an attack which could strike in all the directions, as though it could ignore a numerical disadvantage. But he muttered as though he was dissatisfied.

「It won't even be useful at this level」

The attack Kazuki had fired off a moment ago was called『Raijin』, one of the elementary level skills in『Brave Hearts』.
It looked to be quite flashy, and when it had succeeded for the first time, Kazuki himself had been frightened, but in the game it was just a weak skill which consumed 5 MP (Magic Points). It could be guessed that since the protagonist would learn it at level 1, it would be no good.

Then the reason why he was dissatisfied was because, mysteriously a feeling that he could "do much better" sprouted out inside him. That feeling wasn't necessarily wrong since the number of lightning streaks were 4 at the beginning.

Fundamentally, it was possible for Harold to use magic of all attributes, but among them, lightning symbolized him. And since that Harold's body was shouting "This still isn't my best", as though to answer that appeal, Kazuki was single-mindedly swinging his sword to perfect the ideal Raijin that had crossed his mind.

That was why he hadn't noticed. That the him right now was ascending to heights which couldn't possibly be reached by a 10 year old child.
That how extremely abnormal it was.
He hadn't noticed how he would look from another person's view.

(This is.., I have seen something serious, haven't I ～?)

As though nothing had changed inside, Juno had a calm expression, but unusually, there was a drop of sweat flowing down her cheek.
After reaching a certain point in investigating the Stokes house, when she had set out to seriously investigate Harold, on the first day itself she encountered a scene which made her doubt her own eyes.
After meeting him, I've done nothing but doubt my five senses-she leaked out a faint but wry smile.

But she couldn't just keep on smiling. No matter how she thought about it, Harold wasn't normal.
He was easily swinging an iron sword whose length was as tall as himself, and that sword speed also wouldn't lose out to that of an experienced swordsman's.
Adding onto that, he could also handle swordsmanship which used magic.

That itself wouldn't become a definitive basis to prove anything, but Juno held the absolute belief that he had a big secret.
The problem was whether that secret had the risk of causing harm to the Sumeragi family and Erika.

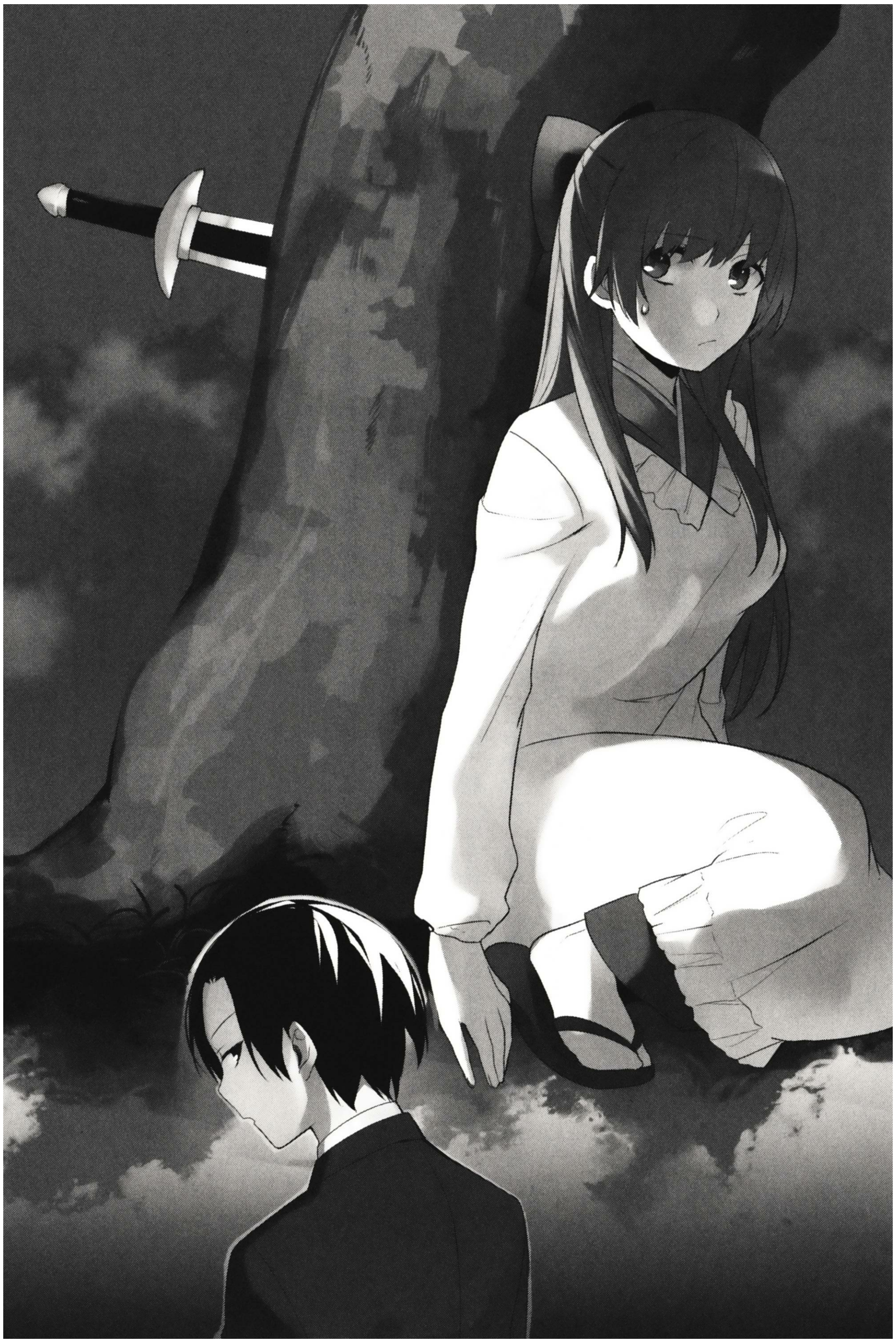
According to the plan prepared beforehand, she had thought of contacting him head on, but she felt that it would be better to rework her plan to include some means of feeling around just in case. Thinking that, the instant she turned on her heels, planning to leave without making any sound, that happened.

Behind Juno who had her back towards Harold, 'Gan'- with a heavy shocking sound, the air shook.

(–!?)

To the abrupt situation, Juno reflexively ducked her body.
The identity of the sound was Harold’s sword. Right now, it had left its owner’s hand and was stabbed deeply into the tree, behind which Juno had hidden her body.
It was a surprise attack which had aimed for the gap in the instant she had switched her consciousness. If the tree hadn’t been there, without a doubt, it would have pierced through her.

To that fact, Juno went pale. Even so, the reason she hadn’t given out any voice was because of the results of the training and experience she had undergone.
But due the surprise being too much, she had magnificently stamped down the thicket, which was a fatal error.



「Who is it? Don’t keep sneakily hiding and show yourself」

Harold’s sharp voice rang out.
Juno thought of planning to make a getaway as it was, but thinking that there was no way she could fool him, who had accurately seen through her covert action, she gave up and appeared in front of Harold.

Thereupon, Harold’s eyes widened by a small amount, and then, his expression changed minutely.

(That just now was relief………was it ～?)

To read that change was the power of Juno’s unique observing eye.
But she didn’t know what it meant.

Compared to that, Kazuki was completely flustered.
Since he had been extremely concentrated on practising Raijin, the sword had slipped out of his right hand and flown towards an unexpected direction, and had stopped after stabbing a tree which was more than 10 meters away.
He was surprised because there was some kind of presence there.

Thinking that maybe it had slammed into a person and injured them, panicking greatly, he called out. On the verge of running off in the direction of the thicket, Juno appeared from the shadow of the tree.
From the looks of it, since she didn't appear to be injured, Kazuki was relieved.
He had almost become a murderer.

「I'm sorry Harold-sama ～, it was unintentional ～」

While Kazuki was worried about wrenching out words of apology even with Harold's mouth, for some reason Juno lowered her head.
It seemed as though she was apologizing for peeking at Kazuki's (Harold's) training. For Kazuki, that didn't matter at all.

「Hanging around in the shadows, insolent. If you don't learn of your position, you'll be injured severely」

If you're going to watch, stay in a position where I can see you. Since if I don't know where you are, I might injure you-not even a bit of Kazuki's concerns were transmitted.
Rather, this was what Juno heard.

(He's giving a warning huh ～………)

Easily grasping her presence, without even offering any room to resist, without taking any action and suppressing her, it was brilliantly done. He wasn't someone who she could take on as an opponent, when there was an existence like Erika near her, who needed to be protected.
He must have also warned her like this since he understood that.

— That there wouldn't be a next time if she went further than this

It wasn't that she had the intention to relax because Harold was a child. She also wasn't optimistic.
But still, he had easily surpassed her. As though he had seen through everything

from the beginning.

It was her complete defeat. Was she really aware that she had fought Harold? He had shown her the difference in ability to even make her feel that question. He not only had physical power, but was also resourceful.

「Fuh, Well fine. By the way, what is the sheltered girl doing?」
(TL – He calls her hakoirimusume – literally daughter in a box, which basically means that she has been sheltered her whole life and is very naive)

Harold suddenly asked that to Juno, who wasn't replying.
At the abrupt change in the topic, even while being confused, Juno answered the question.

「Erika-sama's body still isn't in a very good condition ～. She might be a bit bewildered by the unfamiliar environment ～」

(Just for her physical condition being poor, 2 weeks is too long. There shouldn't have been a setting of her having a weak condition though……….)

After coming back from going around the town, Erika had told that she wasn't feeling well, and from then on she had confined herself in the room for nearly the whole time and hadn't appeared. Thanks to that, he was fully devoted to the trial implementation of LP farming, but since it was so long, his concern gradually increased.
Maybe it's some kind of flag-his crisis perception rang alarm bells. Well, it was already too late though.

「Perhaps, she is homesick. Why don't you go back quickly?」

「You're very cold, aren't you ～? Even though it's temporary, since she is your fiancee, wouldn't it be fine to be a little gentler ～?」

If he could do that, he wouldn't be so troubled. Harold's mouth was just like cursed equipment.

「Worthless. As you've said, the relationship between us is temporary. I have no intentions of being bound by such things」

「What do you mean ～?」

(Ah, crap. I might have talked a bit too much)

He still couldn't make it known that he had plans to cancel the engagement in future.
The only person who knew about this was Tasuku, who had read the letter. And although it was Kazuki who had written it, even he didn't think that Tasuku would completely believe in it.

That was why, at this stage, if somebody came to know that Harold Stokes himself had the intention of cancelling the engagement, the risks would be too high.
At the present stage, he didn't even have any prospects to prepare the plan.

「There is no need for me to explain it to you」

Without even being able to gloss over it decently, spitting out the words of a sore loser, Kazuki went back to the mansion as though running away from Juno. Although he felt Juno's gaze falling around the back of his head, Kazuki kept ignoring her.

Author's Note—

I think that this kind of development is the classical way of misunderstandings. Too easy? I don't hear anything.

Various thoughts and opinions were there, but to be frank, since Juno is a character who appeared only because I wanted to do this in the opening, there's not much of a deep setting for having her hold the unknown device.
And later, she might not come out normally other than for the role of combat instructor.
And that too, the plan is for her to simply play a connecting role.

Next, I'll properly write with Erika playing the main part.
Have to make her evaluation of Harold fall even more!

Episode 13

Due to Juno's interruption, Kazuki had finished his training faster than planned and since it had come to this, he had spare time.
Recently, whenever he had even a little bit of free time, he was putting effort in sword training. He should have started it because he was driven by the necessity when looking at the future, but he had become addicted to the process of acquiring skills by copying the movements in the game.
Maybe due to its adverse effects, other than swinging the sword he didn't have any other means of wasting time. He found this body hateful since he couldn't lightly head out to the town.

Since it was like that, he made up his mind to quietly do some reading once in a while, and picking up a few of the books which were kept in the bookshelf, he started flipping through the books.
Among the large number of books similar to children's books, the one that caught Kazuki's eyes was a book related to magic.

Although, the contents weren't technical. The origin of a magic and its progress, a person who had mastered and represented it and also anecdotes related to it-it was a book where all these were written in detail.
The ones which were taken up were grand moves, where each and every one of them were classified as advanced level magic inside the game. While being convinced that it was something like sure-kill techniques popular with children, he continued reading it.

Inside it, he found a name which he had seen before.

Vincent Von Westerfort.
In the original work, he was a heroic figure who at a young age, served as the captain of the chivalric order of the Saint King. He naturally excelled in sword skills, but he also excelled in magic enough to be introduced on par with historical figures like this.
(TL-Changed knight order to chivalric order of the Saint King)

If he had to be expressed in few words, then it was "ultra firepower".

Making use of his abnormally high defense where one wouldn’t think he got it just from the armor he wore, he would break through from the front, and having the highest attacking power among all the characters in the story, to speak of it, suppressing the enemy with pure force was his combat style.
And sadly, in the final stages of the story, Vincent was an enemy character who fights with the protagonist party. Although he wasn’t the last boss, his strength was authentic and when the party composition had a weak vanguard or when the healing of the person who played the role of the shield was late, the amount of times they were instantly killed wasn’t less.

And unlike Harold, he had gained a high popularity from the players. Thinking over the reason for Vincent standing in front of the party’s way and his feelings, 「Even this guy was suffering huh」- almost all the players sympathized with him. Even Kazuki didn’t hate Vincent.

But maybe it was because he had possessed Harold now. Kazuki suddenly imagined a Harold vs. Vincent battle which was impossible in the original work, and he started turning his mind thinking what Harold could do to win.
One had the story’s highest firepower, the other was the story’s fastest.
If he clashed directly from the front, it would be disadvantageous for Harold. If he directly received Vincent’s attacks, he wouldn’t last for long.

But just by depending on moving around, if it was Harold who had excellent attack speed and variations, Kazuki thought that he could contend with Vincent. During the days when it was released, at those times the concept of depth or 3D movement hadn’t been used like how it was now and the combat system of 『Brave Hearts』 only had 2D movement like in fighting games. And with that, one not only had to control the main character, but also had to give detailed orders to the party members and importance was placed on how high the combo count one could earn was.
Including Kazuki, if it were the experts, it was possible for them to stably connect 80 combos.

But that was naturally because it would be done by a party composed of 4 people. Even though the abilities of the enemy character would be set to a high value since it would be a single enemy, Kazuki could easily connect more than 30 combos in hero fights. Especially, once he had launched the enemy into air, as long as the combo wasn’t interrupted by the other party members, he would make the enemy into a sandbag until the enemy’s life ran out.

That is, for Harold to win against Vincent, he had to keep avoiding attacks somehow or the other, and it would be fine as long as he absolutely didn’t drop the combo once he got it in and kept on slicing him up endlessly. Well, if he could do that, no matter who the opponent was, to start with, he would never lose. In other words, if he couldn’t do that much, winning against Vincent in a 1-on-1 would be difficult.

Then, how would it be if that character was the opponent-Kazuki started thinking of battles with Harold vs. an impossible someone one after the other. Picturing imaginary battle cards and looking for logical moves to win, this was a way of enjoying it only because he was a deep fan.

Like this, once in a while his thoughts derailed and he ate dinner in the middle, and by the time he finished the book which was about 100 pages, it was already late in the night.
Closing the book with a snap, he lightly sighed. It was quite a worthwhile read.

When he confirmed the time, the date was already changing.
When I wake up tomorrow, I’ll search for a book on swordsmanship next. He thought that just before lying down on the bed.
And then, Kazuki finally realized.

(Ah, I came back leaving the sword as it is in the forest……..)

After hastily running away, since he was absorbed in reading as soon as he came back, he had forgotten about it until now.
Juno might have payed some attention and retrieved it, but since she didn’t visit after that, the sword might still remain stabbed to the tree even now.

Kazuki came to an understanding that it was obvious that a normal woman who was an attendant would be reluctant to carry a dangerous object like a real sword, which was completely off the mark.
Actually, she couldn’t simply walk around the Stokes mansion holding a weapon, but she also couldn’t inform the people in the mansion about the whereabouts of the sword since she didn’t want to be needlessly suspected about why she was at that kind of place, and so she just left it as it was.

He examined the situation outside from the window. As though to erase the light from a multitude of stars in the night sky, peeking from the breaks in the clouds, the moon was shining brilliantly.
The yard, which was illuminated by the moon which was 2 times bigger than the one Kazuki knew of, was bright enough for there to be no problems in walking even without any lights.

Might as well go since I remembered about it-Kazuki raised his back.
That was a real sword, and truthfully it was a lethal weapon. From his senses as a Japanese person, he couldn't calm down if a large lethal weapon was left outdoors and neglected. Much less when that sword's owner was Kazuki (Harold), and if by chance a problem occurred, he didn't want to be held accountable for it.

He passed through the mansion, which had fallen silent since almost all the people were asleep, without making any noise.
He passed through the empty hall, and pushing open the front door which gave off a feeling of dignity, he stepped outside.

Since it was brighter than expected, he was relieved as he thought that it would be fine even inside the forest. Even though the beings which could be called as monsters didn't exist here, considerable amount of courage was necessary to wander around a pitch-black forest.
It would be better to get it over with before the moon was obscured by the clouds.

In a slightly fast pace, he went around the mansion and towards the rear. He approached the flower bed in the southwest, which was in the opposite direction of the cellar. The flower bed was expansive enough for it to be expressed as a field of flowers. Flowers of various colors were swaying due to a gentle wind.

Kazuki stopped his legs at the appearance of Erika motionlessly gazing at that scene. The first question that came to his mind was –「Huh, are you alright?」. Even if she had completely recovered by resting for 2 weeks, the air at night would be bad for the body.

This was just genuine concern. An adult being concerned about a child, this

was a very obvious and sensible reaction.
That was why he had no hesitation in taking action by calling out to her in the abusive tone as always, wanting to send her back to her room. Without realizing that it would become 1 of the reasons for the collapse of the original story and his own plans.

If time was turned back to this moment with him retaining his memories from the future, Kazuki would absolutely not call out to Erika. He wouldn't have been able to call out to her.
But there was no way such a convenient thing would happen, and it would be a few years from now that Kazuki, looking back at the past, would keenly feel that this might have been the greatest turning point in his life.
But it wasn't now.

「What are you doing, at a time like this?」

At that voice, Erika's thin shoulders trembled. Timidly turning around, Erika winced as she confirmed Harold's figure.
To the reaction which she hadn't made until now, he had a slight sense of discomfort, but without minding much about it, Kazuki closed the distance between them with unfaltering steps.

「I heard that you were staying in bed since you weren't feeling well. And yet, seeing you standing here in the night air, I can't help but think that you're an idiot who doesn't think」

” To go that far, even for me….” was what Kazuki thought.
From here, he didn't continue with a -「I, it's not like I'm worried about you, alright!?」, but as expected, Harold was scum who didn't have even a little bit of naive nature like a tsundere. He had a despicable nature, but that was how he was.
Even Kazuki didn't want Harold to change into a mass produced tsundere.
Even just by imagining it, his hairs stood on end.

「………」

「Don't just keep standing there, return to your room. As for me, I'll feel relieved if you just go back home like that itself」

Even though the words which didn't seem to be very concerned were hurled at her, Erika was still looking downwards without any signs of movement.

「…….Oi, don't simply keep quiet. Speak something」

Towards Harold's mouth which was starting to get irritated, Kazuki felt as though it was someone else's problem. It could also be called as resignation. Erika was still keeping quiet, but fundamentally, she was a very understanding child. Deciding that if he continued speaking any more than this, he would just be hurting the girl who wasn't offering any resistance, Kazuki finished the talk.

It was probably just that she was very young compared to in the game, and she couldn't be frank in front of a person who held prejudice. She would probably understand what Kazuki was trying to say after Harold leaves and she becomes a bit calm.

「Fuh, Well fine. Even if your condition grows worse, I don't care」

Then why did Kazuki (Harold) go past her after speaking words which would make one want to ask why he even talked to her.
But unexpectedly, Erika stopped him.

「……..Please wait」

「What?」

「I have something that I want to ask about」

Her voice sounded very uneasy, but as though she had resolved herself, she was staring at Harold.
Thinking whether there was any question which made her stop him so spiritedly, Kazuki inwardly tilted his neck.

His doubt was cleared away by the next words she spoke.

「There is a rumor that you burnt a servant to death. Is that true?」

(Ah, it's about that, huh)

Kazuki calmly accepted Erika's question. He wasn't flustered or agitated.

This was because 2 week ago when he had guided Erika, at that time itself he had felt that it would shortly be exposed. Since Kazuki and his parents didn't feel like hiding it. Rather, there were no signs of it not getting exposed.

And from the start, the answer regarding that was already decided.

「No, you’re wrong」

「Then……..!」

When Harold clearly denied it, Erika stepped forward with an expression as though she was glad.
The girl, who seemed as though she had discovered a strand of hope, was pushed down to the bottom of hell by Kazuki (Harold).

「I killed the servant and her daughter, the 2 of them. Well, no matter how many people are killed, it doesn’t make a difference unless they are people who would be talked about in military stories」

A complete change from joy, as though she had heard something couldn’t believe………..no, as though she had heard something didn’t want to believe, Erika’s eyes widened.

「Why…….? For what reason was such a thing……..」

Sadness, rage, despair.
Somehow pushing down the various feelings that were boiling up inside, Erika tried to probe into Harold’s true motives.
But the words which came back from him were only those which completely mangled her heart.

「No particular reason. If I had to tell, it’s because she got on my nerves」

Harold coolly told that he killed her because he was a bit displeased with her.
Erika didn’t understand even in the slightest how he could easily take lives for just a reason like that. As a human, that was a “shouldn’t be able to understand” line of thinking.

「Those 2 were nothing more than livestock. Depending on my mood, I can let them live or kill them as I please, right?」

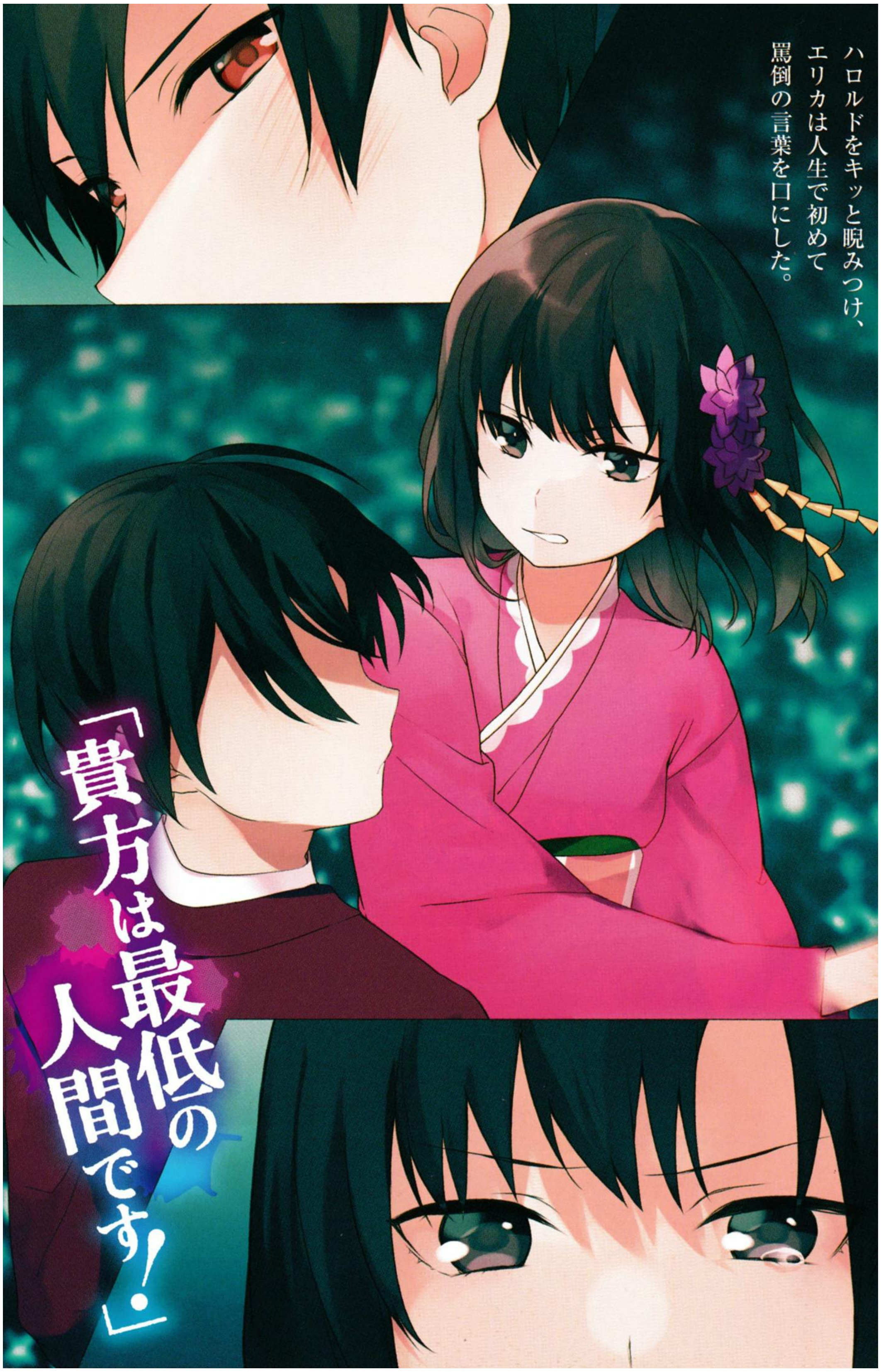
「………Enough already」

「So that the daughter wouldn’t be left all alone in the world, I showed mercy and killed them together. Rather, she might be thankful」

「Stop it, please………!」

「After all, they were inferior species. From the moment they were born, something like freedom–」

Pan-a sound rang out.
The cause was Erika’s palm and Harold’s cheek.
To the statement that discriminated against people who didn’t have the blood of nobles, as『Inferior species』, Erika’s patience crossed its limits.


ハロルドをキッと睨みつけ、
エリカは人生で初めて
罵倒の言葉を口にした。
「貴方は最低の人間です！」

Her hand, which was swung out, was shaking in anger and her eyes, which were shedding tears, were filled with disdain. Glaring at Harold, Erika, for the first time in her life, spoke abusive words.

「You are the worst!」

「So what?」

As though he wasn’t enduring at all, he was even wearing the smile that he always wore that made everyone out to be a fool.
Killing a person, being abused as the worst, as far as he was concerned, all these things didn’t matter at all.
Erika realized. That it was impossible to win an argument with this person.

「..........I have nothing else left to speak with you」

「Ha, that is some delightful news」

「Excuse me」

While he was looking at Erika’s back as she was growing distant, his left cheek which was slapped started tingling with pain.
Although Kazuki had his reasons for pushing her away, even so, directly getting hit with hostility was a painful thing.

(By no means can you think of it as a “reward”)

I’m sorry for one part of the crazy fans, but no matter how you think about it, you must be insane to enjoy this-Kazuki sighed as though he was amazed.
Well, it would be of no help even if he got depressed. It was better than getting slapped by an 18 year old Erika-he forcefully started thinking positively. Since a slap from Erika, who would grow up and experience adventures, wouldn’t simply contain only this much strength.

「Don’t waver. If you don’t get used to this degree, persevering in the future won’t be possible」

The mumbling to cheer himself up was carried somewhere by the wind.

Author –
With this, Erika’s valuation of Harold is at the bottom

Episode 14

After that, although Kazuki quietly retrieved the sword and went back to his room, maybe since he was feeling uneasy in his heart, he couldn’t sleep.
After turning and tossing over the bed for quite a while, he finally got sleepy when there wasn’t much time left for sunrise. Squinting and looking at the sky which was growing lighter, Kazuki thought-a little bit more, and fell into the deep abyss of sleep.

It seemed as though the abyss was very deep, and so by the time Kazuki opened his eyes, it was already past noon.
He got up as though dragging up a heavy body. There was a possibility that yesterday’s damage was still remaining.

(Not to the body though)

He patted the cheek slapped by Erika. Physically, there was no pain remaining. The pain was remaining inside the body, in his conscience.
Even though a night had passed, his heart was pained by the guilt of making a very young girl cry.

That said, even if his mouth tore, there was no way he could have said「I didn’t kill them」. That was not only to protect himself, but also for Erika.

「Fuh, worthless」

Murmuring “Can’t be helped” mixed with a sigh-even this whining wasn’t allowed by Harold’s mouth. If this was Harold’s root, Kazuki was in admiration of his mental toughness.
It was also possible that he was simply egotistic.

As soon as he stood up, his stomach which had missed breakfast and dinner indicated his hunger, but to clear his mind which was dull since he had just woken up, he decide to take a shower.
By the way, there was no bath in the Stokes mansion. Because the culture of bathing itself hadn’t taken root.

It would soon be 4 months since he had possessed Harold. During that, the

only time he had taken a bath was only when they had stayed the night at the Sumeragi's mansion.
That too, the large public bath which seemed like Japanese cypress baths was installed outdoors and rather than calling it a bath, it was luxurious enough to be called as a hot-spring. He swore in his heart that if he got the chance to once again step into it, he would confirm whether it was a hot-spring or not.

While craving for wanting to enter a bath, Kazuki who had showered stepped towards the dining hall to sate his hunger.
On the way, he met Juno who was walking from the opposite side in a corridor. She stopped and bowed towards him, but there was no need for Kazuki to expressly talk to Juno who was just an attendant.

But as Erika's crying face flashed in his mind, by the time Kazuki realized it, he was already asking Juno about Erika's condition.

「How's the condition of the girl with the weak constitution?」

Before he knew it, in Harold's view, Erika had undergone a class change from sheltered girl to girl with weak constitution.
This was him being worried about her so it couldn't be helped.

「That is, today her condition has gotten worse ～. As Harold-sama had told, it might be good to consider going back to the Sumeragi territory so that she gets better ～」

Even though what Harold had called Erika was too much, without changing her expression, Juno let it go. Saved by her magnanimity, and thinking when she would get angry already, Kazuki, who was scared, secretly wiped away his cold sweat.
Returning back because of falling ill at the place they were staying at seemed like a waste of time, but since he was running around due to the situation of Erika staying being outside his expectations, for Kazuki he felt that if they returned speedily, it would be a relief. For a reason different from the one for his parents, he didn't want them to know about Clara's case.

「By the way, does Harold-sama know about the cause of Erika-sama falling ill ～?」

「As if. I'm not a doctor」

That was a lie.
He didn’t know about the past 2 weeks, but there was no doubt that her condition deteriorating by another level today was due the agitation last night. Adding to that, it was unknown to Kazuki, but the reason for her falling ill was because of receiving shock after hearing the rumor that Harold had killed Clara and her daughter. In other words, from 1 to 10, Kazuki was the cause.

But if Kazuki knew about that, his conscience might have taken even more damage. Kazuki wasn’t a failure of a person who had a personality of being happy by giving a hard time to a girl who was only 10 years old.
With an abnormal situation breaking out in her own territory, her family was running about thinking of how to deal with it even while being exhausted, and yet since there were no results, many of the commoners were suffering, and then as though to grip onto that weakness an engagement was suddenly decided. And the fiancee was a person who didn’t even consider people as humans and would easily kill them, the worst kind of scum beyond help. When this was the case, the amount of stress Erika had was quite large.

Considering the environment she left behind and the current state of her mind, it would be cheap getting slapped any number of times was what Kazuki could declare.
In exchange, he wanted to request for her affection points for him to fall to the lowest level.

「That’s a pity ～. Since you could create that medicine, I was sure that you were quite knowledgeable in illnesses ～」

Juno indirectly tried to probe. She was very anxious since she still hadn’t grasped the origin of that medicine.
Kazuki, completely not realizing her intentions, thinking-「I was thought of like that?」, was surprised at how he was assessed.

「If you’re worried, ask your family doctor to examine her. Even if you stay here, it’ll simply be needlessly prolonged」

It wouldn’t be odd for a family as large as the Sumeragi to have 1 or 2 exclusive doctors. If they were anxious of keeping her in their own territory, it could be settled if they just sent her to a secondary residence or a holiday villa with the

doctor tagging along.
Without doing that, since they were hanging on like this, even Kazuki had already perceived that they had some kind of objective. But it was still unknown as to what they were aiming for.

Juno's objective, roughly divided, was to investigate Stokes house's internal affairs and Harold's background. The former wasn't tough, or rather, since the Stokes family was hated, the servants easily opened their mouths, and just by playing the role of the listener to their complaints, she was able to obtain the information that she wanted.
But for the latter, the guard around Harold was abnormally high.

Firstly, since the said person himself was cautious and given that his ability to sense the presence of people was high, she wasn't able to decently approach him. It was to level of seeing through Juno's presence and giving a warning on the very first day of her observation (First Action).
Due to this, Juno couldn't help but change her target.

For that, though she attempted to get in touch with the 3 servants who repeatedly gathered around him, all of them continued to evade her. There was a single instance where Zen, who seemed to be the easiest to take advantage of, let his mouth slip, but still, so far she hadn't been able to get hold of a likely trail. Even including that he was being careful to not make her feel that something was out of place by just engaging in everyday idle chatter, Juno felt that he was made conscious of thoroughly controlling the amount of information he could give out. The current status was that she was at a loss about how to continue when she wasn't clear whether it was because of loyalty or being threatened or something similar.

(From the report given by the scout division, it seems as though he has been frequenting the agricultural sector ～………)

Although she was exchanging information with the scouts who had infiltrated the Stokes house, what he was doing going there was still not known.
Establishing a minority community by gathering individual farmhouses and then having them infiltrate would be difficult.
If they had to do it, it would require a span of few years to arrange for it, and in this case they didn't have that much time for preparations. It could also be said

that due to being too hasty, the orders given by Tasuku to have the scouts concentrate in the inner district where the population was high was a mistake.

After that, finishing the conversation after exchanging a few words, Kazuki resumed advancing. The places where one could have food in the mansion were at the dining room used by the Stokes family, the reception hall where they would dine together with the guests, and the general cafeteria exclusive to the servants.
Kazuki headed towards the dining room.

Without even knocking, he rudely opened the door. Since the time had already passed 14:00, his parents couldn't be seen and the maid-clothes wearing girl who always served the meals, was in the middle of changing the tablecloth.
The girl was surprised by Harold suddenly appearing, and then became flustered.

(She isn't able to move due to the fear and confusion)

Fundamentally, the people who knew Harold's face, no matter whether they were men or women, young or old, all of them would be afraid, so he was already used to this kind of reaction. Let alone receiving a shock, he even had the room for observation.
While thinking over it, he sat down in a place where he wouldn't get in her way.

「After finishing that, inform the kitchen to prepare a light meal. And also, call Norman here. Don't tarry」

「Ye, yes!」

Receiving the order, after quickly changing the cloth, the girl left the dining room with flurried steps. The flapping sounds in the hallway got distant.
After that, without even 10 minutes passing by, she came back carrying the meal. Maybe due to being in the middle of some work, by the time Norman arrived, Kazuki had almost finished eating.

「I'm sorry for being late」

「Sit down and wait」

Tossing the remaining piece of bread into his mouth, barely chewing it, he washed it down with the soup. It was bad manners, but since the only people present were Norman and the maid, he paid it no mind.

Having the maid clear the dishes, Norman spoke when the 2 of them were alone.

「You woke up late today. Maybe the fatigue is piling up?」

「There's no problem. I just had some trouble falling asleep」

「Then, it's fine」

「Well, because of that, I had some time to rack my brain」

Kazuki (Harold) raised the corners of his mouth. Looking at that expression, Norman understood.

「Is it regarding the shortage of personnel?」

「Right. We talked about bringing in people from the outside and having them co-operate, right?」

「Is there a plan we could use?」

「I called you here to confirm whether it wold work or not」

Without going with the classical way of counting sheep, although he thought that he might get sleepy if he started thinking about the solution for something troublesome, against his expectations, without feeling sleepy even for a bit, until dawn he was totally submerged in a sea of speculation.
Though it was worth it since he had thought of something, after all, it was just some shallow thinking of an amateur. Whether it was possible to implement it or not, he wouldn't know the answer until he asked for Norman and Jake's judgement.

「So, regarding the people co-operating from outside, is it possible to form a contract with merchants based on the rights of LP farming method after showing how beneficial it is?」

Even Kazuki who wasn't very knowledgeable in trade was convinced that harvesting the vegetables of LP farming like this in a cycle, and also the technique itself would yield profits. The cost would be somewhat a bit more than the conventional methods, but the efficiency would increase remarkably.
Due to the difference in the taste, they could aim for that differentiation and it might also be possible to create a new market.

Selling the technique of LP farming to the merchants who would further sell it

to farmhouses. The farmhouses would then pay a contract fee to the merchants for utilizing the LP farming method, which would then be divided between the merchants and Harold-was the form of Kazuki's idea.
But at this stage, there was a need to intentionally hold down the volume of harvests, and so that the farmhouses don't oppose against that, if the scope of the company wasn't large enough to send people to inspect regularly, it would be difficult.

Norman, while admiring Kazuki's (Harold's) plan, enquired about the part which bothered him.

「So, do you any leads regarding a company?」

「No. Including that, I wanted to hear Jake's and your opinion」

「With no intermediary, if we suddenly approach a company with the proposal, they wouldn't accept it. If it is an administration by an individual merchant, as expected the manpower wouldn't be enough……」

If it was an intermediary, Harold's parents knew many of them. However, for the proposal to be properly conveyed, they must make the existence of LP farming known, and Kazuki thought that it was still premature for that.

「So, this means that we still haven't found a way to implement it at the present state」

「Unfortunately. But I think that allying with a merchant is a good plan」

「Then, we'll concentrate the talks towards that direction. Convey the plan to Jake too」

「Understood. The problem is how to find a merchant who can be trusted」

After that, the 2 people talked about this and that, but the discussion didn't progress any further.

◇

While making rattling sounds, the carriage following the path between the crop fields passed through the gates of the mansion. Exchanging light chatter with the soldiers who were standing guard at the gates, the coachman who came in was Zen, with a carefree smile plastered on his face.

Zen, who had finished shopping for some items, unloaded the luggage and after returning the cart to its assigned position, he went towards Harold's room. If Kazuki (Harold) had seen that, 「Just like a mongrel dependent on its owner」- he would've made a fool out of him by telling that.

　But the person himself, who seemed as though he wouldn't even mind that poisonous tongue, walked with a pace as though he had gotten used to it, until he came in front of the door and though he knocked on it, strictly ordered to do so by the owner of the room recently, to check whether he was present inside, there was no answer.

　「Harold-sama? Are you there?」

　If it were a normal servant, they would have left with this, but Zen, who was peerless in acting overly-familiar with Harold, opened the door and peeked inside.
Even though he knew it, it was empty as expected.

　Thinking of coming back later since if he wasn't here at this time, it meant that he was practising swordsmanship, he caught sight of a small figure standing in the hallway.
From looking at the small figure which seemed to be dispirited, without being able to bear it, Zen strained himself to speak out in a cheerful voice.

　「Hello, Erika-sama」

　Turning around with sluggish movements, as though noticing Zen's existence only due to that voice, Erika widened her eyes by a little.

　「Good day. You are………」

　「Ah, I am called Zen. What happened to Juno-san?」

　Seeing Erika alone which was unusual, he asked that question. No way, maybe she got into an argument and is dispirited-he guessed wildly, but it was completely off the mark.

　「She is going towards the town for some personal business」

　If told without concealing, she had left to exchange information with the aforementioned scout division. Since she had just left for today, she wouldn't be

back for another 1 〜 2 hours.
Though, she couldn't tell that.

「So it was like that. And so, why are you here……… maybe, do you have some business with Harold-sama?」

Since she was near the room, it wasn't unreasonable for Zen to think like that. But the instant Harold's name came up, Erika's expression clouded up even more.
Right now, he was the person she wanted to meet the least.

But Erika suddenly realized that the person standing in front of her held no hostility towards Harold.
Maybe he didn't know about that rumor. When she thought like that, Erika reflexively asked Zen about it.

「Don't you know?」

「Err…., regarding what?」

「That Harold-sama killed a servant by using magic」

「Re, regarding that, how should I say it……..」

This time, it was Zen's turn to be shaken.
Seeing that reaction, Erika was convinced that he knew about Harold's brutality.
And simultaneously, a question bubbled up.
Even after knowing knowing it, how could he still deal with Harold. She thought that he was just putting up a front, but from the hesitation in his words, it seemed as though he didn't feel any fear or hate towards Harold, but a kind of frustration of wanting to support him but not being able to was oozing out.

「Aah………..although I have heard that kind of plausible rumor being spread about in public, it can't be confirmed whether it is really true or not and since its authenticity isn't definite, I'm hesitant to ask Harold-sama………」

「Harold-sama confirmed that that rumor was true. In the first place, since the one who was killed was a person working here, even you should know that it is the truth, right?」

「Uhh………」

It was as Erika had told. Zen had dug his own grave with his incoherent explanation and was at a loss for words.
Frankly speaking, Zen wasn’t eloquent enough to turn around the situation by creating a smokescreen and confusing her.

Norman had chosen him because he was good-natured, that is to say, because he was a person who could understand Harold’s real feelings and become an ally. But it wasn’t as though his good-natured character would only manifest in front of Harold. Erika right now was depressed enough to stimulate his softhearted nature.

「And yet, why do you……..No, by doing what could one follow Harold-sama like you do?」

Those words which were spoken out in a grave voice seemed as though it was a supplication while also being a question.
No matter what his nature was, for the sake of the Sumeragi family, Erika had to marry Harold. Her will which couldn’t pardon him was an obstacle.

Although she understood it, wavering between her responsibility and emotions, Erika didn’t know how to convince herself.

From the time she was aware of her standing, she had given up on things like love and marriage. Knowing that the person she was going to be engaged to belonged to a house which supported the pure-blood principle, and that they were oppressing their populace, she was filled with rage.
But still, Harold gave hope to the Sumeragi who were suffering.
But in the end, even he didn’t think of people who didn’t have noble blood, as people.

If it could be said that she got her hopes and then despaired at her own convenience, then that was it. She had no words to return.
But the reality that the thread of hope extended in the complete darkness was just an illusion, was more than enough to push down Erika to the bottom of despair.
Even while being crushed in the gap between duty and emotions, and yet trying to earnestly grope around for the exit, Erika’s appearance was too heartless.

But Zen knew. That the despair she was drowning in was an illusion that was intentionally created.

Surely, the world that was waiting for her was very kind.

Because there was no way that he, who was being hated and scorned, and had even resolved to shoulder the sin of being called a “murderer” to save 2 lives, would just abandon Erika like this.

And it could also be thought of like this.

For the sake of her family and the people, the girl who was trying to kill her own emotions was also, like Harold, a person who had strength and kindness.

Even while being young and carrying a heavy burden, Harold and Erika were trying to stick true to their own wills. It was way of living which was very clumsy and where they would always run into walls.

These 2 who were very similar shouldn’t just pass one another, instead they should face each other and expose the real themselves (feelings). The other party was the one and only person they could do that with.

「Erika-sama, can you come with me?」

That was why, even though the unreliable adult (himself) had poor ability, if he could support them, then even if he incurred Harold’s displeasure or even if he was abandoned, he wouldn’t mind it.

「Just a little bit, please give me your time. There is a matter that I want you to listen to」

Author –

For the time being, the plan is to have the misunderstanding regarding Harold completely solved next time.

Episode 15

Erika was awed by his look of strong determination. She didn’t know what Zen’s real intentions were when he spoke out those words.
Without any basis and just by her intuition, Erika felt that if she refused his offer, then sooner or later, she would deeply regret it. She was spurred on by an uneasiness similar to a compelling feeling.

「Understood. Which way should we proceed in?」

「This way」

To lead her to that place, Zen turned on his heels and with firm footsteps, he stopped in front of a certain room.
Zen chose it as a fitting place for talking about the truth. That was–

「Here!」

Harold’s room.

「……….Eh?」

At the development which was outside her expectations, she involuntarily leaked out a stupid voice. Erika was so confused that she didn’t even have the composure to be embarrassed about it.
From the flow of the talk, she thought that he would reveal some kind of circumstances regarding the murder of the servant that Harold was hiding, that is to say, Harold’s secret.

What did it mean by doing that it in the room of the person who had wanted to expressly hide it. Maybe, she had fatally misunderstood something in her conversation with Zen.
But where in the world, what kind of misunderstanding was it?- Erika’s mind was in complete chaos.

「Now now, go on」

「Eh? Ah, hey……..」

While she wasn’t on guard due to her confusion, Zen pushed Erika’s small back

and stepped inside the room. He didn’t hesitate at all since he had already confirmed that Harold wasn’t present.
Zen looked around the room restlessly, and when his eyes fell on the closet, he opened it and pushed Erika, who couldn’t keep up with the situation, inside it.

「Sorry! Please wait here for some time!」

Closing the closet, Zen tried to run out of the room.

「Eeh………..?」

Once again, a voice which couldn’t be though of as her’s leaked out from Erika. She was a guest of the owner, and that too when she was a person who had the position of the fiancee, locking her up in this kind of place had already surpassed the level of being disrespectful. If it were some other person, they would even go as far as killing him.

Fortunately, Erika wouldn’t choose to express her anger in such a severe manner, but still normally thinking, she couldn’t not offer some complaints about this kind of treatment. But this wasn’t the time for that. Before anything else, she must give the highest priority to getting out of this room.

From Erika’s viewpoint, although it was completely against her will, she was still an intruder. If this was exposed, she didn’t know what Harold would spout out.
Thinking of following after Zen, the moment she put her hand on the closet door, cruelly, a ‘gacha’ sound reached Erika’s ears.

「Owaa!」

Subsequently, Zen’s surprised shout reached her. With a timing when he was just about to open the door, since the owner of the room returned, it wasn’t unreasonable for him to be surprised.
Hearing his shout, Harold frowned.

「Don’t give out an annoying voice. Or rather, what are you doing in my room?」

「Uh, umm ～……….. Actually, I needed to inform you about something, Harold-sama, but even though I knocked on the door, since there was no reply I peeked inside the room」

「If there's no answer, leave obediently. How much of an idiot are you」

Erika peeped through the gap between the blinds furnished inside the closet and observed the situation. She had completely lost the chance to escape.
If she came out here and explained, she could still make some excuse. But what would happen to Zen?

Harold was a person who would kill someone just because he didn't like them. Even though it could be said that Zen reaped what he sowed, she wanted to avoid getting him killed.
But it wasn't known whether Harold would listen to Erika's pleas to spare his life. Judging from his behavior, she thought that the possibility was low.

(What should I do……..?)

While Erika was trying to make a decision, the situation was rapidly growing worse.

「So, about the thing I wanted to tell!」

Zen forcefully returned back to the topic. To that, sighing as though he was exasperated, Harold sat down on the sofa.
And against Erika's expectations, Harold urged Zen to continue speaking.

「What is it? Keep it short」

「Ee, it's extremely difficult to say this, but that rumor has spread quite far…….」

Zen was being ambiguous with his words by calling it that rumor, but to the people present, it was obvious as to what it was.

「Just now, when I had gone to buy goods from the town, in the shop where I stopped by, the shopkeeper and the customers altogether were persistently questioning me」

「………..」

Harold crossed his arms and with his eyes closed, he just kept listening to Zen. Even Erika, who was inside the closet, didn't understand what he wanted to say, so she listened closely.

「Although it hasn't been revealed, and precisely because of that, Harold-sama’s reputation will fall to the ground, and I feel that it’ll be bad is we don’t take any measures……….」

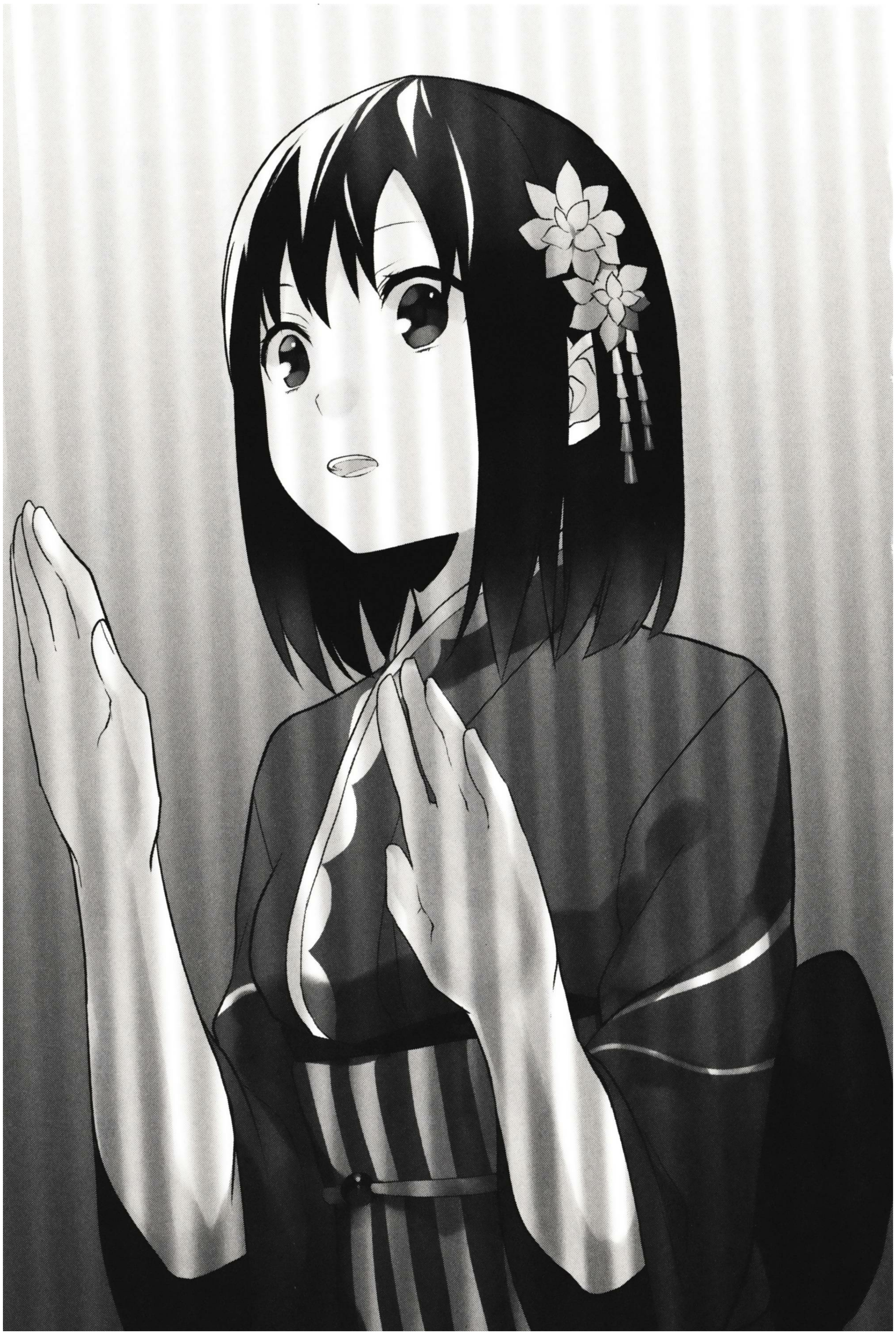
「And here I was thinking of what you might say, worthless. Hasn’t such a thing already fallen down and completely smeared with mud」

「But………..」

「But, What? Do you want to announce that “Clara and Colette have run away to the Brosch village and are still living”?」

「No way! Even if I die, I won’t speak of that truth」

(–Eh?)



Listening to their exchange, Erika's mind became completely white.
What did Harold say? The servant and her daughter, Clara and Colette are still alive?
What did Zen say? That is the truth?

The shock she received exceeded last night's acknowledgement of the murder. Erika, whose thoughts and body were frozen over, could do nothing but listen to the 2 of them talking.

「Then don't think of meaningless things. If by chance my parents find out that they are still alive, I'll be under suspicion. To thoroughly eliminate that possibility, it's already a determined matter」

「Although I know that, at least how about telling Erika-sama the truth? Due to believing in that rumor, it seems as though she's very depressed」

「Absolutely not」

A clear refusal.
If the temperature of his voice could be measured, without a doubt, it would be below freezing point. Zen and Erika's muscles froze in an instant.

「……….Why?」

Zen couldn't help but ask.
Why did Harold reject Erika to that extent. That was because, for Harold, in this world of『Brave Hearts』, in a way he thought that the one he must be the most cautious about was Erika.

The main feature of the character called Erika was kindness. But before that "the way of living" was included.
In the original work, Harold thought that he was a special existence and he was lump of consciousness that believed himself to be the chosen one by thinking that no matter what was done to other people, it would be allowed. That was why he could unconcernedly kill a servant, discriminate and oppress the powerless populace, and could even make a town into a complete sea of fire as a sacrifice for the monsters just so that he could continue to live.
He had all these atrocious deeds piled up, and yet Erika, even while hating Harold, without giving up, continued to suffer by staying as his fiancee.

The reason for that was because she was felt a sense of obligation since the Stokes family had provided financial aid. Normally thinking about it, due to the connection with the Stokes, their family would get scorned at and there was even the danger of the Stokes pulling their legs, but as expected, that was just to enliven Erika's event, for the convenience of the game's scenario.
And so, there was a fear that the kindness due to the setting would stick through with the idiocy and bare its fangs against Harold from here on.

Firstly, as the main premise, Harold's objective was to survive without dying. The things he thought that were necessary for this was avoiding death flags and

clearing the original work's scenario.
There was no need to explain the former. Then the reason for the latter was, if for example, in the case the last boss wasn't defeated, then almost all the people of the continent including Harold would die.
Although it wasn't confirmed, by guessing from the information inside the game, that possibility was exceedingly high. At any rate, if the rampage of the last boss isn't stopped, then the only continent in the world would sink-was how it went.

In other words, even if he avoided the death flags, if the last boss wasn't defeated because of deviating too much from the original work, there would be no meaning in it.
There was a need for the protagonists to clear the scenario by any means possible, and inside the protagonist party, Erika held an important position of being the healer. With her presence or absence, the quest's difficulty level would change. Since their survival rate would be greatly influenced, even for Harold's sake, it was absolutely necessary for Erika to become friends with the protagonist and if that didn't happen it would be troubling.

Moreover, he had a faint hope that if the scenario was cleared like the original work, he might be able to return to his original world. Or rather, he couldn't think of anything other than that with regards to returning back to the original world.

Returning back to the topic, what would happen if Erika, who couldn't abandon Harold until the last moment, learnt common sense and general conscience, and on top of that saw Harold extending a hand to the Sumeragi when they were in a predicament.
It was a hypothesis he didn't want to imagine. She might actively push for the engagement. Well, that would still be fine.
But if because of that, she didn't join with the protagonist, what would happen. That was the situation that Harold was afraid of.

That was why, other than not walking the evil path for avoiding death flags, Harold judged that the the risks would be lower if he got hated by Erika thoroughly in everything other than that part. It would even be fine to declare-Let her affection points eat shit.

How easy it would be if he could explain it like that, but the drawback would be

that they would suspect the condition of his head. He decided to just make up some appropriate reason and stop Zen's questioning.
Breaking the long silence, Harold started talking.

「………She was crying」

「Eh?」

「I don't know if it was because of the truth that I killed a person, or if it was for the mother and daughter who were killed. But no matter for what, her heart was pained for some stranger and she shed tears. She's nothing but an idiot」

He recalled last night's memories. Illuminated by the moonlight, there was single line of tear firmly traced on Erika's cheek.
Though she was caring to the extent which couldn't be helped, that was certainly Erika's virtue.

「And simultaneously, she is too kind. That too, a kindness which only sympathizes with the other person, a weak person's kindness. If such a person tries to walk with me, she'll bear an innumerable amount of wounds」

「That's why, you're purposely distancing yourself from her? Thinking for Erika-sama's sake………」

「Don't spout nonsense. Why would I need to think for her sake. I'm just saying that cancelling the marriage to a troublesome girl, who cries for each and every little thing, is what even I wish for」

Harold's words pierced Erika's heart very deeply. It was very sharp, but it was a completely different pain compared to last night's.

Pangs of conscience, self-hate, regret.
Negative emotions came out successively and tried to swallow Erika. The wave of emotions and Harold's words didn't stop.

「Such……….Eh, Harold-sama has no intention of marrying Erika-sama?」

「There's no way I'll have any」

「Then why did talks of engagement……..」

「To put it simply so that even your brain can understand, this is an engagement bought by money」

The Stokes family, who wanted their lineage, took advantage of the Sumeragi, whose revenue was in a considerably unfavorable condition since the proceeds from forestry, which was the linchpin of their economy, became low because of the unnatural outbreak of miasma in the forest.
Since the unnatural outbreak of miasma was a calamity which had no precedents in the whole continent, it wasn't known whether the Sumeragi would be able to recover, and also repay the money they had borrowed. Among the royalty and other nobles who were hesitating whether or not to provide large-scale financial aid due to these various reasons, the engagement was the result of the Stokes family going to sell a favor without even thinking about the consequences.

After coming to know the motives and circumstances of both the families, Zen noticed a certain thing.

「Then, for the Sumeragi, won't cancelling the engagement be fatal?」

Certainly, as Zen said, if the Sumeragi lost the financial aid by Harold unilaterally cancelling the engagement, then in the near future, the Sumeragi territory wouldn't be able to maintain itself. Well, even if Harold threw a tantrum, there was no way that his parents who were obsessed with lineage would allow to cancel the engagement.
But Harold had no intentions of trifling with that.

「I've already made a move. The medicine and LP farming are for the sake of that」

In the regions where pollution due to the miasma was weak, by using that medicine they would be able to lumber wood like always. Until the protagonist disperses the accumulated miasma, it would gradually extend its range, but putting it in another way, it shouldn't extend more than it had done in the game. Even in the letter to Tasuku, he had dug up the game's map from his memories and had informed him about the expected maximum range of pollution. If they could predict the maximum range of damage beforehand, even the Sumeragi could pull back their defense line.

Adding onto that, he also had the intention of offering the know-how of LP farming. Although, since the outlook still hadn't been good, in the letter he had stopped by writing some dubious statement like-「I'm even considering offering

some knowledge about industrial techniques」.
Receiving the explanation which left out the parts of the information about the game, Zen expressed as though he was dumbfounded.

「You have even thought about such things…….」

This was the first time he had heard about the medicine and the letter, and knowing that there was such an intention hidden behind LP farming, Zen could do nothing other than be wonder-struck. How far into the future was this boy gazing at.
And Zen wasn't the only one to be surprised. Even Erika, who was holding her breath, was shocked by Harold's foresight and depth of thinking.

Harold had sensed the danger towards the Sumeragi in advance. That too, before the talks of engagement had come out, immediately after the outbreak of miasma. If thought of it like that, then she could understand how he was able to gather the information about the ingredients required to make the medicine even without a few days passing by after the engagement was decided.

In other words, this meant that Harold had tried all possible means for the sake of saving the Sumeragi who should have been completely unrelated to him. Although he was insisting that he had done it for selling a favor, if the money, time and effort spent until the medicine was created, was put on scales, then the merit of saving the Sumeragi would be too less. All the more when considering Harold, who seemed to be for the pure blood principle from the way he talked. Thinking about that dedication and his thoughts, Erika's vision blurred.

Honestly, even Harold had made this decision only after thinking over it for a long time.
It was clear that if Erika knew he was giving them this much support, then her sense of obligation would be much more than that in the original work. Then the reason why he took actions which weren't in the game was because he wanted a patron.

In the place where the Stokes couple's eyes could reach, he wouldn't be able to move freely and he would also be unable to have his way with gathering people who could act for him.
And there, he thought of making contact with the Sumeragi with the cover of a

fiance. He had thought that he could trust Tasuku, since he knew Tasuku's personality from the game. He had compassion, was understanding and also had personal connections, and if Kazuki could gain his cooperation, it would become easy to support the protagonists from the shadows.

By offering the medicine, industrial cooling down could be delayed, LP farming could bolster the economy and if the protagonist took care of the miasma accumulation event, even forestry could be restored. If that happened, even without the financial aid of the Stokes, the problem of managing their territory would disappear, and if Erika's engagement was cancelled, they wouldn't receive a serious blow. Moreover, regarding the cancellation, Harold himself had informed in that letter that it would be fine to do it.

(Exactly like a "debt" parade on the scale of Kazoe Yakuman*. Although that salesmanship feeling of pressure isn't half-assed, as long as I don't have any unreasonable requests, Tasuku should cooperate in most of the things)

(TL – *A term in Rīchi(Japanese) Mahjong about which I have no idea of. I think it means the person who has that gets a high amount of points, maybe. You can look it up here. If anybody has a thorough understanding of it, please explain in the comments)

That wasn't confidence but conviction.
However, he had a single concern. That concern which might be classified as an "unreasonable request" was connected to Zen who was in front of him, so he unintentionally warned him.

「Right, after that think about your future also」

「What do you mean by that?」

Harold who had adjusted his voice so that it couldn't be heard from outside, reduced it even more. It was to the level that Erika, hidden in the closet, was barely able to catch it.

「I've told it before, but in the near future, there is a danger that the Stokes family will fall. If you don't want to become jobless, it'll be prudent for you to be prepared just in case」

「But aren't you spreading LP farming to prevent that?」

「If nothing is done about the current taxation and wasting of money, it’ll just be to the degree of an extension. Even I’ll think of something, but it might not succeed. I have no intention of helping you bastards, so do something by yourself」

Even the always happy-go-lucky Zen lost his composure at this.
Harold who was talking about it as though it was natural, was the one who was weird.

「If that happens, what will happen to the people of the Stokes territory?」

「Who knows. But if it is Tasuku Sumeragi, he won’t do anything bad to them」

He spoke in a slovenly manner. But a name which Erika couldn’t let slide rose up.

(Why is father’s name being used here……….?)

「Err………What do you mean?」

「In the letter, I have appealed to the Sumeragi side to not deal with the populace unjustly when the Stokes family falls. Really, I can’t help but laugh at their weakness since they wouldn’t survive if something like this isn’t done」

Even if he told appeal, it didn’t mean that he asked for the Sumeragi to provide for them. If it were the Sumeragi who were close to the royalty, the people could expect some influence and support from them.
It could also be said that since Kazuki didn’t know whether Tasuku would accept this “request”, he sold an excessive amount of favors.

(Most probably, it’ll become the territory of another noble, and I pray that a person more decent than the one now comes)

Although, by that time, he wouldn’t be there in this land. He was completely ready to throw away everything to the successor.

「Anyways, that’s how it is. If you break the ban by telling it to others, you won’t simply get away with it」

「I, I understand. I haven’t told it to anybody, alright…….?」

Pierced by the sharp glint in Harold’s, Zen’s voice quavered. That there was another reason for his voice quavering, and Zen’s roundabout way of telling-「I haven’t told anyone」, Kazuki didn’t notice it at this time. Well, even if he noticed the existence of his nemesis (Erika) hidden in the closet, it was already too late.

Author –

Kazuki, Harold, Kazuki (Harold) – since many complaints have come out that 3 representations is confusing, I have chosen to use only Harold.

It’s painful for Zen to be called incompetent.
It’s my fault though.

|

Episode 16

「Is that all? If you're done, get out immediately」

「Though I really want to do that ～…………Ah, Harold-sama, what will you do now?」

「What is it, all of a sudden. There's no need to tell you」

「Well, I was thinking whether or not you will practice swordsmanship today」

Looking at Zen's suspicious behavior, where his eyes was moving around restlessly, inwardly, Harold tilted his neck.
Certainly, while he was chatting with Zen, since the food in his stomach had also been digested, he had thought of going to the usual place to practice his technique, but that should have had no relation to Zen.

「What about it?」

「I've kept it a secret until now, but actually I'm interested in swordsmanship! That's why, I was thinking of maybe going to see Harold-sama wielding the sword」

He unintentionally wanted to retort-Then, change your main job to a soldier. It was just that Harold's physical abilities were high and he was just an amateur, it would be impertinent to call it self-taught style with his level of skill.
A while ago, since he was doubtful of his skill, Harold had requested the soldiers to spar with him, but maybe due to being afraid of injuring him, all of them stuck to only defending and none of them even tried to attack him properly.

It was obvious if he thought about their standing, but for Harold, not having a personal practicing partner was a problem.
He thought about maybe asking his parents, but it was those 2, who were partial towards Harold, that would arrange for an instructor. He was doubtful whether he could learn the swordsmanship used in real battles, which was what he wanted.
Thinking that he would think about that part little by little, he deemed that it was alright since he had found a practice partner for today.

「Then I’ll show it to you, from a special seat」

「Umm, Harold-sama? Why are you holding 2 swords? Though I’m interested, it doesn’t mean that I have experience, alright? Suddenly asking to become an opponent is a bit……….」

「Don’t talk back」

「P, please, give me a break!」

As he was dragged away by his nape, Zen’s shouts were fading away. Soon, when she couldn’t hear any voice or footsteps, Erika got out of Harold’s room when it became silent.
Luckily, she hadn’t been spotted by anybody, but even when she had returned back to the room given to her, she couldn’t sort out her emotions which were completely mixed up.

She was pondering over the words which Harold himself had spoken out.

The servant whom she had thought was killed, was still alive.
And while guiding them, to give the highest priority towards their safety, he had suffered dishonor.
He had also wanted to purposely get himself hated by his fiancee, Erika.
And yet, he wanted to do something to save Erika and the Sumeragi.

Naturally, she didn’t believe that all of this was the truth. She was also aware that Harold and Zen might have prepared that exchange beforehand.
But still, at the same time, there were parts which were convincing. Especially, his attitude which seemed to fan Erika’s hostility towards himself, and his behavior which showed hints that he had started working on the medicine from a few years back.

What was true and what was false, how to approach Harold-Erika could no longer find out the answers for these. Even her own feelings about what she wanted to do were obscure.
It felt as though she were wandering around inside a thick fog without any aim.
The one who roused her consciousness was Juno, who had come back after completing her errands.

「Erika-sama, are you there～?」

Following a light knock, her usually slow voice was heard from the other side of the door.
With that, Erika's heart calmed down by a bit.

「……….Yes, it's fine to come in」

「Excuse me ～」

She was wearing the same cooking outfit as always. That outfit which didn't change no matter what the time, now felt as though it was very reassuring.
Juno easily sensed these subtle changes in Erika's heart.

「Did something happen while I was away ～?」

Although it was in the form of a question, Juno was convinced that something had happened to Erika. And she intuitively discerned that it had something to do with Harold.
At Juno's sharpness, Erika's body stiffened up.

She hesitated whether or not to tell about everything she had heard to Juno without holding anything back.

If the contents of what Harold had talked about were true, so as to not make light of Harold's consideration, she should keep silent. Since Harold had gone as far as to get dishonored to protect the servant and her daughter's safety.

But as a person from the Sumeragi, there was a need to judge the authenticity regarding this no matter what. Even for the sake of making sure what kind of person Harold was.

「–Juno, please listen」

After worrying over it, Erika decided to tell Juno. Of course, not the whole story.
Only the minimum information about how Zen had pushed her inside Harold's room, and then had talked about how the 2 people who were rumored to be dead were still alive.
Although she had omitted quite a lot of it, the subject were more than enough to make Juno raise her eyebrows.

「That's why, I want it to be investigated whether Clara and Colette are really alive or not」

「Understood ～. I'll immediately make the arrangements ～」

Although Juno had just returned from the town, she once again went back. Since Juno herself couldn't move very far from the mansion, she had to request the scouts to go and investigate in the Brosch village.
And even as she was going to the town, Juno was continued to think. Listening to Erika, Juno had felt a big sense of discomfort.

(Would a thing like Harold-sama not noticing a third party hiding in the room even happen ～?)

Harold was powerful enough to easily sense the presence of Juno, whose livelihood was spying. Was it even possible that such a person would overlook Erika, who didn't even have the ability to kill her presence.
The answer that Juno deduced was a no.

The possibility that Harold had intentionally leaked this information to Erika, that is, to the Sumeragi side, was quite high. Why he had leaked the information, which was concealed from the people around him, to the Sumeragi, even she was unable to grasp his real motives for doing this.
If that were the case, then right now, she was moving as Harold would want her to. When she thought like that, Juno was bitterly regretting it.

(At that age, he makes one feel bottomless dread ～. If he were to grow up, what kind of ingenious scheme would he come up with ～)

She didn't know whether to anticipate or fear that future figure. If he became an ally, there wouldn't be many people who would be as reliable as him.
Not only was he resourceful, at that age, he had even learnt the sword. Even the word prodigy would be thought of as too lukewarm.

But if in case they became enemies, undoubtedly, he would be a formidable one. To the extent that if he were to be killed while he was young, they could reduce their future losses remarkably.
He could become a big enough threat for them to think like that.

Regarding Harold's behavior, it couldn't be helped that Juno had given such a judgement.

It couldn't be called unchildish. Putting adults to shame-even that wasn't enough.
It it was only to that level, there was no way he could lightly toy around with Juno and move around without Tasuku seeing through his true motives .

Even if that wasn't what Harold himself had aimed for, it could be said that it was inevitable that the other party would perceive it as such.
And Harold's biggest mistake was manipulating the degree of affection and due to being too desperate to adhere to the original work, he had neglected his own assessment from the surroundings. Even though he himself understood that his behavior deviated from children within his age group, but to be mindful of it and acting prudently just because of that, he had no leeway with either time or mind or manpower.

In a way, it was a very probable situation.
But if here, he had become properly aware of how he was assessed and what it meant to be thought of like that, he could have avoided stepping into predicaments due to being unprepared. If he had thought of wanting to avoid this kind of development, he could have.

And also, it was fatal for him to not investigate Erika and Juno's aim even though he felt that their very abrupt long-term stay was inexplicable.
If an explanation was needed, then this was due to the negligence Harold brought upon himself, exactly because he knew that in the original work, Erika hated injustice and going around the truth. He had never thought even in the least bit that she or her attendant would act like spies.
If he had paid close attention to Erika and Juno's movements, if he were to become aware that the information about Clara and her daughter being alive had gotten out, at the very least, the possibility of the situation falling into this state would have been low.

As a result of magnificently ignoring all these various factors, Harold would foolishly choose the move of heading to the Sumeragi territory once again out of his own will.
The start of it was when close to 3 weeks had passed from when Erika had come to learn of Clara's survival, that is, when about a month had passed since Erika had started staying in the Stokes mansion. It was a command given out by

Harold's father, Hayden.

「I should go to the Sumeragi house?」

Like the other day, after Hayden had asked Harold to come to his study, the subject he talked in a serious manner was about how he wanted Harold to escort Erika, who wasn't feeling well, back to the Sumeragi, and how this time, he wanted Harold to stay over at their place to deepen their relations.
The former was just a front while he was aiming for the latter. Hayden thought her bad health was just to the level of her being homesick.

「That's right. Because I can't go this time. But it's necessary for the sake of showing good faith」

(Good faith, is it? Most likely, he just wants to appeal to the surroundings that the relationship between me and Erika is favorable by making me accompany her……..)

It had already been officially announced in the Stokes territory that Erika was Harold's fiancee. Due to that, sure enough, the emotions of the people towards Erika shifted to pity.
He couldn't help but be amazed at how his popularity in his own house was non-existent. He had no confidence to change it to a positive assessment.

「Understood. Then it should be fine to make preparations for the departure as soon as possible」

「Hahaha, to think that you would be so worried. It seems as though unknowingly, you have become surprisingly intimate」

Obviously, that wasn't the case. In the first place, since Erika had secluded herself inside the room for the whole time, he had no chance to get close to her, but it seemed as though Hayden interpreted it to something which was convenient for him.
Although he wanted to remark sarcastically about how naive his thinking was, since there was no way that this annoying mouth which feigned obedience in front of his parents would ever allow it, Harold, with Hayden laughing in a good mood in his peripheral vision, treated this visit to the Sumeragi house as a chance. Shall I wager on a match here-he was eager about it inwardly.

Although he was impatient inside, that was a very rash decision. It might also be that he became conceited because he had found a clue to solve the situation even when there was still a pile of problems.
That is to say, it was like stepping on the greatest landmine. He should have been more calmer before taking action.

Even such basics had been forgotten by Harold at this time. He still didn't know that due to his actions he would invite a new death flag.

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Episode 17

And so, when it was hurriedly decided that he would visit the Sumeragi, on that same night, Harold explained fairly well about the policy they would follow from then on to Norman and the others, and made the preparations required for a long term stay.
After that, he left the Stokes mansion a few days later, and a week from then, he arrived at the Sumeragi territory where the cherry-blossoms were in full bloom.

The cherry-blossoms Harold knew of couldn't be in the state of full bloom for a whole month, but it seemed as though that wasn't the case in this world. It must be that "Cherry-blossoms" and "Cherry-blossoms" were just similar but not the same.[1]
While thinking about that, Harold was sitting in seiza[2] on the cushion laid on the room of tatami mats, and was gazing at the pink flowers swaying in the wind.

It had been about 30 minutes. While putting into practice the method which he had learned in his previous world of sitting in seiza so as not to let his legs become numb, Harold was waiting for Tasuku to finish his official tasks, while sipping on some green tea[3] once in a while.

「Harold-kun, how about another cup of tea?」

「………..Make it a bit more stronger this time. The aroma is thin and above all, it's tepid」

With the desk in between, sitting diagonally opposite from Harold, Tasuku's wife, Koyomi, as though she was a maid, waited until Harold's teacup was empty and extended her hand towards an iron kettle being heated up in a small hearth of about 40 cm^2 beside the table.
Contrary to how completely grateful he was inside, Harold's mouth which didn't know any fear, gave an order. Well, it was true that although the tea was good, it was lukewarm and on top of that in contrast to the sweetness of the traditional snacks[4] to go with the tea, the diluted tea felt a bit unsatisfactory.
Nevertheless, there was no need to spit out such words.

「Ara, then this time, I'll make the tea a bit more stronger and hotter」

「Do that」

It seemed as though polite speech was activated not in front of his elders but only in front of his parents. But even towards Harold's haughty attitude, Koyomi's gentle smile didn't break down, and with experienced movements, she poured hot water from the iron kettle into a small teapot and steeped the tea. Though this digressed, Harold didn't know that for good quality, that is, to steep high grade green tea[5], it would be the best to use somewhat hot water with a temperature of 70 degrees.

Inside the room, where the aroma of tea leaves was wafting around, Harold was sipping on green tea while gazing at the cherry-blossoms. The only sounds that entered his ears were the whispers of grass being swayed by the wind and the 'kakon' sound made by the bamboo of the bamboo fountain hitting the rock in a periodic manner.
It was a refined moment as though Japan's aesthetic sense of quiet simplicity and subdued refinement[6] was crammed into it.

(Aah, I'm being healed………..)

For Harold who was a Japanese person inside, this was a reception of the highest grade. It was also large that, to Harold who had always been working either his mind or body since the moment he had come to this world, this was the first time a healing tranquility had appeared.
Moved by this moment which could also be called as a time of supreme bliss-It wouldn't be bad to just live in the Sumeragi house-with this tempting thought, he raised his neck.

Koyomi was gazing at Harold, who had closed his eyes and was breathing slowly, with a smile, but also with some interest. The thing which pulled her interest was the conduct with which Harold had entered the room.
As far as Koyomi knew, the only place in this country which knew about the culture of seiza was the Sumeragi territory.

From his previous visit, she had understood that Harold was acquainted with the culture of the Sumeragi to some extent.
But removing shoes and changing into inner-footwear at the entrance, sitting in

seiza for a long period, eating food using chopsticks-Even if one knew beforehand about all these customs and cultural practices unique to the Sumeragi, it was a different matter of whether or not they would be able to actually conduct themselves like that.

Normally, even if one knew about it, there would be some point where they would hesitate, but Harold, without any difficulty, that too as though it were habitual, did these things naturally. As expected, that he would have his own preferred taste and even temperature of green tea, was outside her expectations.
It wasn't that he knew about the Sumeragi's culture. He had experienced it.

(But where?)

It was hard to think that he had experienced it in the Stokes mansion. The head, Hayden, was almost completely ignorant about these things.
If there was a person who was from the Sumeragi near Harold, she didn't know what it meant for only Harold to be taught manners and not Hayden.
Anyway, he was boy who had many inexplicable points about him.

Maybe due to that, Koyomi unconsciously started observing Harold's actions. As a result, the room was completely silent. Well, since neither of them found it painful, there was no need to worry. They spent another 10 minutes peacefully like this, and then, the tapping sounds of someone walking in the hallway started getting closer.

「Sorry for making you wait. Work was prolonged, you see」

From the other side of the sliding door which was left open, Tasuku showed himself. Maybe due to feeling sorry for making Harold wait, there was an awkward smile on his face.

「Like always, it seems as though you don't know what to do」

「Even though it appears like that, it has become considerably better. It's thanks to the resistance drug created by Harold-kun. I'm truly grateful. Thank you」

No sooner had Tasuku sat on the cushion than he lowered his head. Koyomi also followed him.

Harold was taken aback at the abrupt event.

「Raise your head. It’s unsightly. I didn’t do it to be thanked by you bastards」

「I can’t afford to do that. I don’t know what you were thinking for making a move, but still, it’s an unshakeable truth that the situation changed for the better thanks to you」

That’s why, there is no way that I can’t not show my gratitude as the head of the Sumeragi house-so as to not make that known to Harold, Tasuku stared into Harold’s eyes with a bright expression.
Unable to bear it, Harold moved his line of sight.

「Fuh, worthless. To have no choice but to lower your head to a child like me, be ashamed at your own incompetence」

「I have no words to return. Well, as far as I’m concerned, I’m happy to have met a youth like you whose future will be full of expectations」

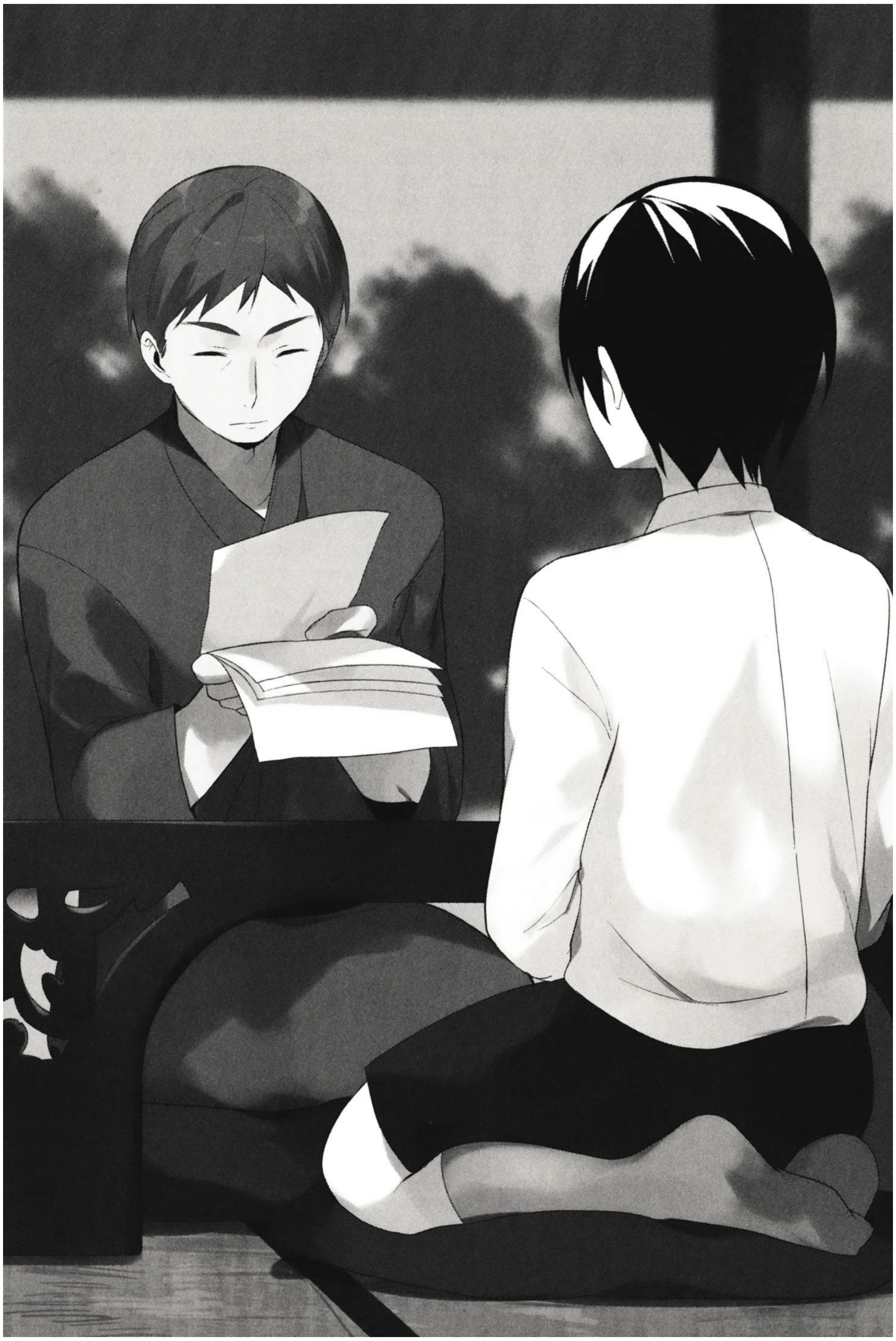
「Is that so. Then wag your tail and cooperate with me」

「……….That is the reason you requested to speak to me? Aren’t you being a bit too hasty by abruptly jumping straight to the main point without any introduction?」

「I have no intention to engage in gauging each other’s hand. Read this first」

Carefully produced by Norman and Jake, it was the latest version of the document which consolidated the effects and application of LP farming that were proven at the present point of time. He placed it on the desk.
Urged by Harold’s gaze which asked him to “read”, Tasuku took it in his hands.

And as he kept turning the pages, the seriousness in Tasuku’s face continued to increase. That reaction was as Harold had expected.
Or rather, if it wasn’t like that, he would be troubled. First of all, it was necessary that Tasuku understood the extraordinary worth of LP farming.
That was the premise upon which the negotiations this time would be held.



Tasuku, who was reading the document thoroughly as though he was eating it, after reading the last page, sighed lightly and closed the document.

「How to say it……….The contents are crazy」

「Right? But it's the truth」

「So, it's within your expectations that I would be doubtful?」

「Doubtful? How about frankly telling me "I don't believe it "?」

Daring. That one word was more than enough to describe Harold who was snickering with the corners of his mouth raised.

Looking at it from another way, it meant that he had that much confidence. If, for example, this were a bluff, then he was quite an actor.

However, he had past results. With regards to the miasma which broke out in the forests inside the Sumeragi territory, he had offered the method to produce the resistance drug free of charge.
Due to that, the hope to reconstruct the management of the Sumeragi territory became visible when they had been cornered.

「……….To just assert and finish it like that is your dreadfulness. Because, even with the content being this preposterous, you make me think of wanting to listen to your talk」

「Even if it's the truth or lies, the listening part is free」

「Certainly. But just by showing this document to me, it's a huge harvest for me though」

「If you want such a thing, I'll give it to you. After all, it's just a copy」

Looking at Harold just cutting and throwing it away as though it didn't matter at all, although it was inside, Tasuku was shaken for the first time.
In this document which informed about an original crop cultivation method called LP farming, the details as well as the volume of information was huge and had been consolidated in a very good manner. The process itself was easy and the risks were low. It would be easy to implement it.
If he discontinued the negotiation here with -「As expected, I don't believe it」, he could obtain the possibility of earning profits without any losses to the Sumeragi.

Even though it was like that, Harold had given him the initiative to lead the negotiations. This meant that Harold thought of LP farming itself as nothing more than an opening act for the real issue.

(Since I realized this possibility, I can no longer pull back, huh)

To be exact, the risk would increase if he pulled back. Having the Sumeragi test whether LP farming had any defect might be the situation he was aiming for.
Or, even if there were no tangible damage, he might negotiate with some other place and there was the danger that they might suffer at a later date.
To prevent that, as expected, he had to listen to the main topic Harold would

talk about here and try to read his true motives as much as possible.

If even this thought process was induced, then it isn't to the extent of him being just formidable-lamented Tasuku.
From the report delivered from Juno, Tasuku was informed that Harold wasn't someone's puppet, and the possibility of him acting due to his own will was high. After confronting him like this and exchanging words, he was convinced that it was the truth.
It was impossible to manipulate a person to such an advanced degree by influencing their thoughts or brainwashing them.

「Then, let me take up your offer」

「Do that. Or rather, if it isn't like that the negotiation can't continue」

「Fumu, what does that mean?」

「Assuming that everything written in that document is true, what do you think?」

To Harold's question, Tasuku answered a beat later.

「It's a ground-breaking invention. After implementing it and increasing the harvest, if no particular problems occur, to start with, a production system can be prepared in this territory. And after a certain degree of predominance is secured, I would let it spread around the whole country」

「You won't monopolize it?」

「If a limited amount of people monopolize resources, it would trigger disputes in the future. Because I think that even I haven't become dumb enough to fall so low as to be surrounded by enemies due to jumping at the profits in the near future」

「……….Fine then, you pass」

From Harold who was familiar with Tasuku's personality, it was the ideal answer. Holding down the impulse of wanting to retort「Who the hell do you think you are」to himself, he continued the negotiations.

「Even I roughly share your opinion. It is fine to profit from LP farming, but being seen as an enemy from the surrounding masses is irritating. And so, I came to make a proposal」

「By all means, I’d like to hear it」

As both their lines of sight intersected, instantly the atmosphere of the room became strained.
And once again, Harold pasted that fearless, bird of prey like smile on his face.

「I’ll have you become the joint developer of LP farming」

TL –
1. 1st cherry-blossom(sakura) is in kanji(桜) and the 2nd one is in katakana(サクラ).
2. seiza is the traditional way of sitting in japan-kneeling with the tops of the feet flat on the floor and sitting on the soles. Can I use seizaing from now on?
3. ryokucha- The most common tea in Japan is ryokucha.
4. wagashi-Traditional Japanese confections served with tea.
5. gyokuro-Literally “jade dew” is a type of shaded green tea(ryokucha) in Japan.
6.wabisabi-represents Japanese aesthetics and a Japanese world view centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection.

Episode 18

That proposal took Tasuku completely by surprise. There was no need to even talk about the reason.
Since Tasuku had no part in the development of LP farming at all.

「What do you mean? I haven’t been involved in the development at all though………」

「Only until now. But from here on out, for spreading out LP farming we’ll use the Sumeragi’s name」

From his words, Tasuku remembered something. Within Juno’s report, there was information that “his behavior in front of his parents is different”.
He had thought of it as just the difference between his behavior in front of his relatives and others, but a single possibility went across his mind.

It was that Harold might be hiding his own ability from his parents. If they had known about his capability, they would have tried to show his appeal much more when they had first come to decide on the engagement.
Adding onto that, Harold himself had hinted at the fall of the Stokes house in the letter. That meant………

「Harold-kun doesn’t think of it as a good plan for your parents to know about LP farming?」

「As expected, I well understand my parents’ personality」

If they knew about LP farming, in all probability it would advance towards the development that Tasuku feared. Harold was convinced of it.
That was why, he had come here like this to ask for the Sumeragi’s cooperation.

「Moreover, I don’t have enough pawns. If I increase the trial farmhouses any more than this, I won’t be able to monitor them」

「I see」

He understood what Harold was trying to say here.
He wanted to enlarge this operation without letting his parents become aware of it. For that sake, there were limits if he continued as it was.

Since it was such a ground-breaking method, there was a need to control its management completely so as to prevent any information leaks. And to do so, since the human resources he could gather wasn’t enough he had brought this proposal to the Sumeragi.

「But why to my side? If there were this much profits, I think that anybody would jump at it」

「It was just that with the conditions I wanted fulfilled, you were the easiest one to cooperate with」

This was a bluff. If Tasuku shook his head horizontally, Harold would be in a predicament since he had no other intermediaries.
But since he understood Tasuku’s personality and knew about his weakpoint, he would use his a certain thing as leverage.

「If you refuse, I just need to reach out to the 2nd or the 3rd candidate. Well, that won’t be necessary though」

「You think that I would absolutely accept this proposal?」

「Right, you have no choice but to do that」

Absolute confidence no matter what. What was it that made him think like that. Tasuku didn’t think he would just come here with a strong stance without any basis. Rather, he seemed as though he would use logic to cut off the opponent’s path of retreat beforehand.

(Wait, block the path of retreat? No way……..!)

An unpleasant bead of sweat rolled down Tasuku’s cheek.
Due to a sudden flash of insight, he connected together the scattered pieces and formed an answer. As soon as he reached that answer, chills to the extent of freezing his spine ran through Tasuku.

「You realized?」

That voice which carried an ominous sharpness as though it were the scythe of the Death God, struck Tasuku’s ears.

「……….Were you anticipating this situation from the beginning?」

「So what? Would it change your answer?」

Tasuku closed his eyes. Like Harold said, his answer wouldn’t change.
In any case, since Erika had been put on the scales, he could do nothing other than agree.

「So, this was what『Offering industrial techniques』informed in the letter meant, huh………」

Tasuku dropped his shoulders and muttered. The reason was Erika’s engagement annulment.

His daughter had accepted a restrained future out of responsibility, and they weren’t her true feelings. Harold himself had suggested in the letter that he didn’t mind even if it was annulled.
The conditions to accept it were-to compound the the resistance drug and to improve the condition of infected patients by using it, to quarantine the estimated maximum pollution area of the miasma, and also to restore their economic power by implementing the offered industrial techniques.

At that time, he had thought of it as just some nonsense or coercion of a 3rd party.
But if it became that all the contents of that letter were written by this boy, then the situation would be different. Not as a head of the family, but as a father, those terms were extremely attractive.
That there were no disadvantageous parts in Harold’s proposal also backed his decision.

He might have intentionally written the letter in a manner which didn’t suit his age, like an adult. By doing so Harold had insinuated that there was a mastermind, and since Tasuku had entertained that suspicion, he hadn’t even reached the possibility that Harold himself might have written the letter. Even though he had received the report from Juno.
In other words, from the time Tasuku had received that letter, he had done nothing more than move around on Harold’s palm. To bring out this situation, from how long had he been acting.
In front of the preparations which seemed as though Harold had predicted the future, he was in utter shock.

「Certainly, it’s attractive enough to jump at it spontaneously……….But what is the reason for you to care about the Sumeragi to such an extent?」

　If he had just wanted to increase his intimacy with the Sumeragi, then the things he had already offered were more than enough. And moreover, there was no way he would want to annul the engagement which was the firmest connection.
Without being able to read Harold's intentions, Tasuku's confusion only intensified.

　But that was natural. Harold was only moving for the sake of thoroughly evading his death flags which would fall in the future, and from the people who didn't know about this, reading his intentions was almost impossible.
Even if he were to explain, there was no way Tasuku would understand, and he also didn't have any intention of explaining.

　「Even if I tell it to you, it's not like you would……….No, it's something that nobody other than me could understand」

　That tone seemed like self-depreciation. Looking at Harold, who was fearless until now, taking that kind of attitude, Tasuku was at a loss for words.
As though waiting for that unguarded moment, Harold pressed for an answer.

　「So, what will you do? If you say that you can't trust me, then this negotiation is over」

　Certainly, if asked whether Harold was trustworthy, he still wouldn't be able agree.
But it wasn't definite that his goal would harm the Sumeragi, and if Tasuku were to accept this proposal, the Sumeragi house, their populace and even Erika's future could be saved.

　If said in other words, Harold was going so far to do this. Even this matter, if Tasuku was made to forcibly accept it, it would be almost impossible for him to raise an objection.
Even though Harold was in a position that was overwhelmingly advantageous for him, to the end he just brought the discussion over in the form of a proposal.

　Although it looked like Tasuku had no choice to refuse, that was wrong. If he closed his eyes off thinking of Erika's engagement as a sacrifice, refusing would be possible. If that happened, the connection between the Stokes house and the

Sumeragi house would become unshakeable, and even without LP farming they could just receive financial aid from the Stokes as agreed upon before.

Or rather, with this proposal Harold was the one who had to take a risk. And that too, normally thinking it was a risk he didn't need to take.
It was easily imaginable that he had invested a considerable amount of time and money on developing the resistance drug. Even though he had done that much, with there being the danger of the situation coming to nothing, he had left the decision to Tasuku in the end.

(It's not easy to do this………..)

He honestly thought that. Was made to think like that.
If he thought about it carefully, Harold was moving so that there weren't any losses to the Sumeragi.

Normally, if one was brought such a convenient proposal, nobody would easily accept. They would doubt the other party, investigate for suspicious points, and if their doubt wasn't cleared, they would refuse. Even Harold's proposal was like that.
That decision as a result would link to the possibility of simply letting go of the profit which they could have obtained.

But Harold had expressly prepared a rationalization like "Erika's engagement could be annulled". So that it would be easy for Tasuku to accept the proposal. Although it seemed that it was thought of as being over interpreted as good will, nothing else could explain why Harold hadn't broken down the appearances of a discussion to the extent of bearing unnecessary risks.

(Even though it could be that he is using this train of thought, in that case, opposing wouldn't help. No matter what, it's my complete defeat)

Tasuku slowly exhaled the large breath he had taken in. He raised his head which was bent downwards, and gazed firmly at Harold's eyes.

「I accept this time's proposal」

That was Tasuku's answer.

「Although it was predetermined, well I'll praise you for your prompt decision. In a few days, prepare some of the people who work under you and the fields owned by the Sumeragi. To start with, I’ll drive into them the know how of LP farming」

「Will only that much be fine?」

「After that, according to my estimation in a few years a large scale company will be necessary. One which keeps information confidential and which can be trusted. I’ll leave that judgement to you」

「I see. After solidifying the foundation, we’ll cooperate with the company and increase the number of fields which can be managed and later on, sell the technique through the company, right?」

「It seems like you have a better head than my pawns」

Though he was condescending, inwardly Harold was astonished at how good Tasuku’s conjecture was. Since he had obtained a very reliable colleague, Harold was completely satisfied. Even if he wanted to sell the technique, he wanted to borrow the Sumeragi’s name to hide it from his parents-he was sure that Tasuku would read this intention of his even without telling him.

「Anything else that is required?」

「And……..」

When he was about to say it, Harold closed his mouth. He hesitated thinking whether it would be right to say it at this timing.
Sensing that, Tasuku extended a hand in complete good will.

「If there is something, I want you to request without holding back. If Harold-kun wants it, as much as possible I’ll try to help you」

「………Then prepare for a strong fellow. While I’m staying here I’ll accumulate one-on-one combat experience as much as possible」

To survive in this world, inter-personal combat strength was absolutely necessary. To obtain that which couldn’t be obtained in the Stokes’ mansion, Harold resolved himself and took a step forward.

Episode 19

The evening of the day on which Harold and Tasuku confirmed their cooperative relationship.
The veil of darkness had descended and within the darkness where moonlight didn’t reach the ground due to heavy clouds, as though to run away from that darkness there was a single room within which a bright light was burning.
In that room, starting with Tasuku in the chief seat, his wife Koyomi and daughter Erika, personal attendant Kiryuu, and with the cooking outfit, on which there was not the least bit of dirt, as her trademark, Juno, were all silently sitting.
As though to loosen the tension, the head of the mansion, Tasuku, started talking.

「Well then, It seems like you have some report. Juno?」

「Yes. There’s something that I have to inform Master and also Erika-sama about」

Although she spoke in a calm voice, it wasn’t in her usual slow manner of speaking.

「Even Erika?」

「Indeed. Since I was moving under the orders of Erika-sama」

With those words, all gazes other than Juno’s gathered on Erika. Receiving that, she lowered her head deeply.

「I’m sorry for mobilizing them on my own, Father. But there was something that I absolutely needed to confirm so I ended up borrowing Juno’s strength」

「Something you absolutely needed to confirm, means something regarding Harold-kun?」

「That’s right. Father, are you aware of the rumor that Harold-sama killed a servant and her daughter?」

「Yes, a report that some rumors like that were floating around the streets of the Stokes territory did come」

Even the scouts, who had disguised themselves as traders and travelers to infiltrate into the Stokes territory, had heard about the matter of how the mother and daughter were killed. Maybe because, since before there was hatred towards the Stokes family among the populace it was quite widespread.

「……….The possibility that it was untrue came up」

「False? In other words, the 2 who were killed in the rumors are still alive?」

「To ascertain the truth, I had Juno and the others cooperate with me」

And now, Juno was here to report the results of the investigation.
This time, everybody's eyes were on Juno. All of them were waiting for her next words.
Towards that, Juno didn't try to put on any airs and started talking.

「Regarding this time's affair, the rumors being circulated are wrong. The servant Clara and her daughter Colette who should have been killed are still alive」

To that report, Tasuku narrowed his eyes and Erika bent her head down and strongly clenched her fists, which were on top of her knees. She was attacked by feelings of guilt.
While looking at her as though she was worried about her, Juno continued her report.

「Currently, the 2 of them are living in a small village called Brosch village which is under the jurisdiction of Viscount Ballack. Although it was quite difficult, I was able to obtain testimony from the person herself」

「What do you mean by difficult?」

「Since they hadn't changed their names, it was easy to find them from asking the villagers, but she stubbornly refused to talk about what had happened during that time」

Receiving that report from her colleagues who had gone there before her, Juno headed towards the village herself. When she personally tried talking to Clara, it wasn't to the extent of turning her away at the door, but it seemed as though Clara had no intention to talk about the real situation.
But it also wasn't as though Juno could simply back away with「Then it can't be

helped ～」. And while exchanging words with Clara, she realized about a certain thing.

It was that Clara felt a huge amount of gratitude towards Harold.
While insisting that he had personally killed the 2 of them, Harold had covered up their survival, and even while knowing that there were rumors of him killing them, he gave no signs of wanting to stop these rumors. Adding onto that, it was unknown as to why the person who was supposed to be killed was feeling a sense of gratitude towards Harold.

When she thought until there, Juno formed a certain hypothesis. In the case that the hypothesis was true, she had a good idea to shake Clara.
And simultaneously, it was something that would trample all over Harold and Clara's feelings.

But even if that happened, Juno didn't have the choice to hold her tongue. Stifling the bitter feelings, she continued on.

『Harold-sama is taking on the dishonor as a murderer and is continuing while affirming it. Due to that, the populace are being hostile towards him, and although it isn't being shown on the surface, Harold-sama was becoming extremely haggard.
I don't have any intention to expose the hidden truth under broad daylight. But if you talk about the truth, Harold-sama would be able to gain a sympathizer behind the scenes. Please provide some assistance by thinking of it as helping him』

Those imploring words which were exaggerated here and there were instantly effective. When Clara heard Juno's words, her face became ghastly pale and she covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes filled with tears and after a few minutes of agonizing silence passed, she finally told Juno everything that had happened on that day clearly.
And she regretted. That she could do nothing other than talk due to being compelled.

「……….What did she say?」

「It seems that it all began about 5 months ago, when Clara almost injured Harold-sama by mistake」

From there, Juno conveyed everything that she had heard from Clara accurately without any excess or deficiency to everybody in the room.

With that as the impetus, Harold's parents had gotten enraged and had almost killed her.
Harold had lied to them by telling them that he would experiment with magic on her and had then locked her up in the dungeon.
And while buying some time, he had devised a plan to save Clara.
So that the daughter wouldn't be left all alone, he had put them together.
He had prepared for a large amount of money, a carriage and household goods and provided it to them free of charge.
He had been taking on the dishonor even until now was most probably to ensure their safety.

「………..She talked about it while in tears」

Listening to Juno's report, all of them were at a loss for words.
Behind that arrogant attitude, Harold was very strong and kind, and at the same time it was because he knew about the suffering that he had done this.
And Clara who knew about that, even though it was for the sake of saving him, must have felt pain as though her body was being cut since she had talked about the truth ignoring his feelings.

Erika stood up abruptly and extended her hand towards the sliding door.
Tasuku stopped her by asking her.

「Erika, where do you plan to go?」

「……….No matter what, I have to apologize to Harold-sama. Without knowing anything, without even trying to know, I cursed at him just based on my emotions, and moreover I even raised my hand. Although it's something that can't possibly be pardoned, but still at least……..」

It wouldn't do if she didn't apologize in all sincerity.
But those thoughts were obstructed by Tasuku.

「That isn't acceptable」

「Why?」

「He's doing this much, putting everything on the line, to protect them. Now that we've come to know about it, the behavior we should choose isn't sharing the secret but to scrupulously adhere to the secret. If he comes to know that there has been information leakage to the other party, when we still can't completely trust each other, we're talking about Harold-kun, he'll become cautious of more leakage and become even more solitary than he is now」

　If that happened, there was a danger of Harold who had been fighting alone so far being driven into even more solitude. Though it seemed that Harold would do something even then, even so it was thorny path.
Under that thick mask, he might have been hurt an innumerable amount of times, and at times he might have also cried.

　「It is obvious that Erika wants to apologize. But is that really coming due to being aware that you have wronged him? Can you declare that you just don't want forgiveness for the cruel treatment?」

「!」

　That was why Tasuku stopped her. Even if he had to say some unreasonable and harsh words to his own daughter.
Erika also understood what Tasuku was trying to say. In her head at least, she understood it. But her heart, her emotions couldn't be put in order by reason.

　「……….Then what should I do? What do you want me to do when I can't even correct my mistake, when I can't even apologize!?」

　Erika's figure which was screaming like that suited a little child's, where she was acting her age. Towards Erika, who was normally more mature than required, but who was showing this childish behavior now, although he was aware that it was extremely inappropriate, Tasuku smiled pleasantly.
Standing up quietly, Tasuku went towards Erika, and gently stroked Erika's head which was around the height of his abdomen.

　「Become a person who can support Harold-kun. He is exceptional, but he is too excellent. Sometimes that strength will isolate him」

　Exchanging words with Harold, Tasuku instinctively perceived a certain thing. Most probably, Harold was looking at the world with a different point of view from his, or rather from a normal human's.
If that wasn't the case, the words "It's something that nobody other than me

can understand” wouldn’t have come out.

When he said that in a somewhat lamenting manner, he must have understood his own future that Tasuku had been worried about. But fortunately or unfortunately, Harold also had the strength to endure that solitude.
If it were him, no matter how precipitous the path, he would continue to walk on. Tasuku felt that strong will from Harold.

「If you are thinking of wanting to repent for your actions, don’t beg for forgiveness, but whatever he’s trying to accomplish, watch over, support, get closer to him and try to become a person who truly understands him」

「Getting closer to Harold-sama, becoming a person who can truly understand him………..」

「That would be something very difficult to do. Because of how exceptional Harold-kun is, although he might want colleagues, he might not need friends. Can Erika accompany him, who can perform many things alone, and trust his arbitrary judgement?」

Above all, it was obvious that Harold himself was trying to push Erika away. Tasuku didn’t think that he would take such an attitude without any reason.
He might have such a reason to do that towards Erika.

That is, no matter how much Erika tried to devote herself to him, there might not be anything rewarding. And that again would be walking on a harsh path.

「……」

And Erika wasn’t immature enough to assert with a「Yes!」like a child with naive thinking. This was because, how much her own actions were self-centered, and how different it was from the ideal form that Tasuku talked about, she understood it so well that it was painful.
Bending over and matching his eyes with Erika, who was gnawing at her lips as though she was mortified, Tasuku admonished her in a kind voice overflowing with affection.

「There’s no need for you to give an answer immediately. It’s fine for you to decide what you want to do by learning from his figure. Well, I do think that you have to apologize that you went too far for raising your hand against him」

He sent Erika, who appeared to be dispirited, back to her room after she uttered a「Yes……..」in a tiny voice. He decide that even if he said anything more today, she wouldn't be able to organize her emotions.
After Erika left the room with Juno following her, Tasuku smiled wryly.

「When the engagement was decided, she was considerably depressed, but this time too it's the same」

「But the reason is completely opposite though」

Compared to him, Koyomi chuckled in a voice like tinkling bells.
Just 2 months before, although Erika was behaving firmly, towards an engagement with a person she didn't wish for, inwardly she was feeling dispirited.
But now, she felt regret at hurting the said person, and even had thoughts of wanting to be recognized by him. Although, it seemed as though she herself still wasn't aware of that feeling.

「Children continue to mature like this………」

「What are you saying so seriously? Shouldn't this be the first time you have personally experienced our child's growth」

「It is especially so if it's the feelings concerning your own daughter. By the way, Kiryuu, what was Itsuki's reply?」

「It seems that he'll be back by tomorrow morning」

Towards Kiryuu's words, who had refrained from speaking and was silent for a long time, Tasuku again smiled wryly.

「Well it's about him. I knew he would say that」

「Since that child loves Erika. Even if it's training, wouldn't it be too much to make Harold-kun fight against him?」

「It'll probably be fine. From Juno's report, it seems like Harold-kun is quite skilled. It shouldn't become one-sided」

Nonetheless, even Tasuku didn't think that Itsuki would lose. Anyway, those 2 clashing will be quite amusing-that sudden impulse which had a touch of youth flashed across his face.

「You’re making a bad face, dear」

「Unthinkable. It’s just that my heart is dancing looking at children who have a bright future」

「Master is also still youthful, is it?」

「Ha ha, no mistake」

「Haa, no matter how old, boys will be boys」

Koyomi felt exasperated and sighed at Tasuku and Kiryuu nodding and grinning.
Harold, who wasn’t even aware that the adults were talking about these things, was satisfied that things went well even though there were some unexpected situations, and savoring the feeling of the futon which he hadn’t felt in a long time, he went to sleep.

And then, the next morning.
With a cold expression, Harold, who didn’t seem to be in a good mood even in the slightest, had breakfast together with Tasuku, Koyomi and Erika. And this happened after they had finished breakfast.

「That’s right, Harold-kun. About yesterday’s matter, I’ve prepared a fitting opponent for you」

While drinking green tea after the meal, Tasuku said so. At those words, Harold frowned.

「You act quite quickly even though I mentioned it just yesterday」

「It’s just that by some chance a strong person was nearby. As soon I asked about the bout, he immediately acknowledged」

「Who the hell is it?」

「That is an enjoyment that will have to wait until you meet him. He just came back this morning, but how about sparring right away?」

「Naturally. You’ve prepared the place, right?」

Without being able to suppress his impatience, Harold stuck on. Looking at that appearance, Tasuku deepened his smile.

「Obviously. We'll travel in the carriage so can you make your preparations?」

No sooner had Tasuku finished speaking, than Harold left his seat and returned back to his room. Japanese clothing[1] — because it would be hard to fight in clothes like yukata[2] given in Japanese inns[3], he went to change.

「Even yesterday, but Harold-kun is fine with sitting in seiza」

「Even without listening to the servant's explanation, he wore Japanese clothing. The way to use chopsticks and wearing garments too, it seems that his knowledge regarding the Sumeragi culture is quite deep」

「………..Come to think of it, he knew about the cherry-blossoms too」

The Sumeragi family gazed at Harold's empty seat in wonder. A few minutes later, Harold's figure with his usual outfit was present in the carriage. The ones who were riding with him were Tasuku and Kiryuu, and for some reason Erika too.

Erika who was sitting next to Harold seemed to feeling extremely awkward. Harold also understood that feeling well.
There was no mistake that she hated this. Most probably, Tasuku had some kind of plan.
Reasoning it out like that, Harold didn't unnecessarily open his mouth and continued to be rocked by the carriage.

After a while, the place they arrived at was a huge arena[4]. The first thing that came into his sight after he got down from the carriage was a 10 meter entrance. It gave off an imposing air, and when he entered into the grounds after passing through the entrance, in the huge space there were various facilities lined up, and from here and there he could hear shouts and 'don' sounds as though hitting the floor even without straining his ears.

Among these, the one Harold was led to was a dojo which had an especially stately atmosphere and it had 2 storeys.
Similar to its appearance, they climbed up the wooden stairs attached outside and entered the dojo through the front door established in the 2nd floor.

With light from the sun flowing through the grid patterned windows, that floor didn't feel gloomy and was like a rest area. In one corner, many adults were

laying out the tatami mats which were placed horizontally and taking up some space.
The instant Tasuku and Erika entered the rest area which was clamoring and overflowing with energy, it became silent and in the next moment, everybody lowered their heads and took a posture of bowing.

「Sorry for visiting all of a sudden. I'll be borrowing the lower dojo for a bit. Has Itsuki come?」

「Yes. I saw him this morning」

Tasuku talked to the people inside the dojo in a familiar manner, and the adults who were addressed also answered as though they idolized him. Their relationship of trust was apparent.
While looking at that scene, with Kiryuu in the lead, Harold and the others followed after him and descended to the 1st floor.

There was a kendo[5] hall present on that floor. There were 2 match courts, and the ceiling wasn't present.
There were spectator seats present on the 2nd floor, and maybe due to Tasuku visiting or something, the number of people who were peeking on the situation on the 1st floor started becoming more and more.

But for Harold, those spectators were trivial. His eyes were already glued to a certain point.
There was single boy swinging his shinai[6] in the middle of the kendo hall. He was older than Harold, maybe around 12 or 13 years old, and he was silently repeating practice swings. With that itself, he had the power to draw one's gaze.

「Itsuki」

When Tasuku called out his name, the boy stopped his practice swings and turned towards them.
He had black hair and eyes like a pure Japanese person. He was about 10 cm taller than Harold, and with his refreshing and handsome features, he could live as an idol even in Harold's original world.

The stunning pretty boy[7] Itsuki, said this as soon as he opened his mouth.

「Ooo, Erika! In the short amount of time I haven't seen you, you've become even more beautiful!」

Ignoring Tasuku, he rushed to Erika in a straight line, and gripping her hands, he earnestly started praising her. Erika turned eyes which seemed as though she was embarrassed, towards Itsuki.

「……..Oi, don't tell me, this guy is my opponent?」

「Although I know what you want to say, his strength is real. Relax」

「I was sure that I told you to "arrange for a strong guy". No matter how you look at it, he's just a kid」

「Even you're one, right?」

Nothing except Erika in his sight-although that was how Itsuki appeared to be, it seemed as though he had properly spared some of his consciousness towards Harold too. Completely different from the one towards Erika, with a somewhat dark smile, he turned towards Harold.

「First, let me introduce myself. I'm Itsuki Sumeragi, Erika's elder brother」

「………Harold Stokes」

「That's it? That's not it, right? Aren't you omitting the most important part」

With a plop, Itsuki placed his hand on Harold's left shoulder.

「You're Erika's fiance, right? My! Prideworthy!! Sister's!!!」

While feeling his shoulder being gripped tightly by Itsuki's right hand, Harold realized.
That this guy, without a doubt had a heavy sister complex.

Author –

I couldn't include the fight.
Sorry.

TL –
1. Wasou – Traditional Japanese clothes like kimono and yukata.
2. Yukata – Japanese garment worn by both men and women, although there are some differences. It's like a casual summer kimono.

3. Ryokan – It is a type of traditional Japanese inn that originated in the Edo period.
4. Budokan – It is a training facility that houses a number of arts sharing a similar culture origin or perspective.
5. Kendo – a Japanese form of fencing with two-handed bamboo swords, originally developed as a safe form of sword training for samurai.
6. Shinai – a weapon used for practice and competition in kendo representing a Japanese sword.
7. Bishounen – Japanese term literally meaning “beautiful youth (boy)” and describes an aesthetic that can be found in disparate areas in East Asia: a young man whose beauty (and sexual appeal) transcends the boundary of gender or sexual orientation.

Episode 20

Come to think of it, Erika had an older brother-although it was too late, Harold remembered. If he had to give a reason as to why he had forgotten about him so much, it was because not only had Itsuki not appeared even in an episode not related to the main storyline, even his name wasn’t made clear in the game.
But if he thought about it calmly, if Erika were the only child, with her getting married off into another family, the Sumeragi house would most likely become extinct. With such a situation, there was no way they would easily agree to an engagement, so to not realize about the existence of an older brother was Harold’s blunder.

Well, that in itself wasn’t a huge problem. But Itsuki being the older brother having such a heavy sister complex was completely inconceivable.
Having Itsuki, who had a dark smile on his face, laughing with a ‘Fufufufu’ as the opponent would be extremely bothersome.

「I’ve heard about it. Well then, come fight with me」

Those eyes closely resembled a ones of a carnivorous beast eyeing its prey. He was completely receiving unjustified resentment, and Harold also didn’t want to take him on looking at his behavior, but still Harold convinced himself that it was for the sake of gaining precious real battle experience.

「Don’t touch me acting all familiar, you small fry」

He had wanted to just normally request「My shoulder is hurting, so could you please remove your hand?」and he had no intention to pick a fight.
But as long as he had this mouth, he couldn’t avoid falling into perilous situations. The mouth is the origin of calamity-Harold could even believe that this proverb was a wise saying written down in the Shinten[1].

「You’re more than motivated, huh. Then, prepare immediately」

While inwardly drawing away from Itsuki whose smile deepened, thinking that it would certainly be hard to move around with the current attire of a boy from Britain, in accordance to those words, he changed to the garments prepared in the changing room.

On top was a white dougi, and below was a dark blue hakama like an outfit for an archery club member[2].

Looking at Harold who came out after changing his outfit, Tasuku, Itsuki and many people sitting in the spectator seats of the 2nd floor gasped. Although the boy who was only 140 cm tall was wearing a clean, brand new dougi, no innocence could be felt from his behavior. Harold was emitting an intimidating pressure which pricked one's skin.

「Is this the weapon?」

Similar to the one Itsuki was holding, he took a shinai which was on the wall. For the sake of grasping the sensation, when he lightly swung it, it was light enough to make him think that there was almost no weight at all. While making 'Hyunhyun' sounds of cutting the air, Harold freely swung the shinai around as he pleased.

It was a flowing sword handling which was so sharp that onlookers could only stare at wonder. Looking at that, Itsuki breathed out a light「Hee」in admiration. Although he had heard about Harold beforehand, actually looking at Harold's sword skill, he renewed his awareness to not be negligent. For Itsuki, though he was a detestable opponent who stole his beloved little sister, looking at how a kid of only 10 years of age had trained to this extent, he was honestly feeling admiration.

Simultaneously the hope that if it were Harold, he might be able to enjoy the fight boiled up.
If talking about swordsmanship, Itsuki was outstanding. He might be a person in the domain of prodigies.
Therefore, even at the present time he wouldn't easily lose to a grown man in a fight, and on the other hand, there was a huge difference in power between him and the other children of his age, so much so that there was no way they could fight him.

If said that he didn't feel any discontent about that at all, then it would be a lie. Somewhere in his heart, he had always wished for a rival who was close to him in both age and strength.
And now, an opponent who might perhaps become that had appeared. If only

Harold wasn’t Erika’s fiance, Itsuki would have even thought of welcoming him with open arms.

「It’s as though it’s a stick」

Harold’s impressions after swinging the shinai briefly was only that.
Though that way of putting it was too much, for Harold who had continued to train with an iron sword until now, he felt that the shinai’s weight was lacking.

「Well then, are you ready?」

「Don’t ask foolish questions. Let’s start already」

Towards Tasuku who wanted to take confirmation, in an arrogant manner which felt as though it was even refreshing, Harold replied.
He was nervous. It would be fine to even call it fear. Although Itsuki was a character who didn’t make an appearance in the original work, he was a human who was living in an RPG like world where swords and magic and monsters existed as though it was natural. He was inside such a world and was called strong so there was no way he would be ordinary.

When thinking normally, there was no way a person who was care-freely living in modern Japan could win. But Harold also believed in something other than this body.
Although this mouth which repeatedly used abusive language and provocative statements which gave him trouble, this high-spec body which could implement movements and ability which could never have been possible with his original body, was without a doubt a huge asset.

As he closed his eyes, in the darkness, the fight with the original Harold floated up clearly. When he had fought for the 1st time, he was made to had experienced hardships at the overwhelming speed and skill.
Currently, the body he was in had the capacity to accomplish that eventually.
And if he were to control this body of his own will, then–

(I don’t feel like losing)

In both of Harold’s eyes, a never before seen strong light was burning. With those eyes, he glared at Itsuki who was in front of him.
After the 2 of them became silent, Tasuku confirmed the rules.

「Weapon is the shinai. Including the head and face, attack to the vitals, and also usage of magic is prohibited. No time limit. The match will conclude when any one of you is unable to fight or gives up. With the exception of these, it's equal to real combat. Are there any problems with the rules?」

「None」

「Are you saying that this is equal to actual combat? It's considerably lax」

「Although you're dissatisfied, no matter what I want to avoid any large injuries. Unless you put armor, it has to be at least this much」

「……….Well fine. For today, those conditions will do」

Rather, he was thankful for that proposal, but on the surface he reluctantly agreed. Tasuku was inwardly relieved looking at that. The reason was because he had proper understanding of Itsuki's ability. With his swordsmanship which wasn't inferior even when compared to a soldier who had experienced actual combat, if it wasn't limited to a certain extent, the chances of him injuring Harold were high.
Even if it was something that Harold himself wished for, it wouldn't be fine to injure a noble's eldest son, that too the child of another noble who providing assistance.

Even without it being said, Itsuki understood his Father's concern. If possible, he had wanted to fight with his all, but considering both their positions, it would be difficult.
Then, let us cross swords as much as possible within the given extent was what he thought. That was why he unexpectedly said the following words.

「I'll leave the first hit to you. Give it your all」

Itsuki had no intention to look down on Harold. Since he couldn't use all his strength, he wanted to know what Harold's full strength was like.
So to speak, it was words with feelings close to apology since he couldn't help but hold back against Harold who had wanted a serious match.

「……..」

Towards Itsuki's attitude which could even be called complacent, Harold unexpectedly didn't respond. It was just to the extent of raising his right eyebrow by a little. Maybe it was because he was calm enough to accept it as worthless behavior, or maybe because of quite anger which suppressed his irritation.

In exchange to Tasuku and the others moving back to the wall, a man with wide shoulders stepped forward and stood in between Harold and Itsuki who were gazing at each other.
Confirming that the 2 of them had taken their stances, he loudly pronounced the start of the mock battle.

「Both parties, take your stance………..Start!」

Simultaneously moving with the declaration to start was Harold who was given the first hit. That in itself was roughly as expected.
But the thing which was out of anybody's expectations was Harold's speed. With a speed as though he had disappeared, Harold stepped in and closed the gap between him and Itsuki in an instant.

「!?」

It wasn't only Itsuki who raised his voice in shock. Among the ones who were watching this match, people either had the same reaction as Itsuki's or no voice even came out because they were doubting their own eyes.
But even if Juno, the only person who had actually seen Harold's speed with her own eyes, were present here, even she would react like everybody else. Because, that speed and the sharpness of his movement, when compared to a month ago, he had improved exceptionally.

Since it took Itsuki completely unguarded, he couldn't respond properly. But still, it was only possible because it was Itsuki that he tried to take a defensive form out of conditioned reflex.
But that was it. As their shinai collided, a 'Shiiin' sound reverberated inside the dojo. In the middle of that echo, a 'Gasha' sound rose up as one of the shinai fell to the floor.After Harold passed by in an instant, the one who stood bare-handed and paralyzed was Itsuki.
While everyone were at a loss for words, with the shinai hanging loosely next to him, Harold spat out words while sneering at Itsuki.

「If this were a real death match, you would have already been dead. Aren't you glad, that I wasn't serious」

It even came off as a sarcastic remark. But for Itsuki, he heard it as though it was even filled with disappointment.
As though enduring his frustration, he clenched his right hand, which still had a dull numbing sensation due to having the shinai knocked away from his hand, tightly.

「…….Right, it's like you've said. I apologize for underestimating you」

The feeling of regret welling up in Itsuki's heart wasn't towards Harold. It was because he was ashamed at his own foolishness of unconsciously looking down on Harold although had no intention of being negligent.
And as he realized that Harold was disappointed in him, at the same time he was also convinced.

(Even he was searching for a rival with whom he can compete with his all, huh? Like me)

Itsuki imagined thinking what he would have done if their positions were reversed. If Harold had held back like how he had done, then as expected Itsuki wouldn't have been able to suppress his anger.
Harold might have placed that discontentment in that last strike. On the other hand, because he was angry he wasn't able to give his all.

Itsuki's kinetic vision was somehow able to perceive Harold's sword. If he hadn't seen it wrong, Harold had intentionally matched his sword's trajectory to the defensive posture Itsuki had taken and had knocked his shinai away.
The reason he hadn't hit Itsuki's hand or body like that itself was because it was an implicit complaint -「You also Fight seriously」, was how Itsuki interpreted it.

Only a single part, that Harold had intentionally aimed for the shinai was correct. It was just that Harold, who looked 10 years old but whose mental age was close to 20, had no courage to strike Itsuki, whose age wasn't odd enough to call him a child.
Although he was resolved to get hurt, as expected he was hesitant to hurt Itsuki. This time's battle's 1st step was to overcome that kind of feeling, but it wasn't possible when the opponent was a kid.

「And this time, I want to request from my side. Please, fight with me for real」

「Are you an idiot. From the start, this contest was for the sake of doing that」

Without the least bit of hesitation, Harold stated. So quickly that Itsuki unintentionally felt let-down.
Although even Harold didn't want to do it, but since from the start he intended to survive in this world of survival of the fittest there was no need to hesitate.

「………..Ah, that's right, huh」

「If you still want to fight, hurry up and pick up your weapon. If it's just that much, I'll wait」

「Thanks. But I'll take the first move next, alright?」

Picking up the shinai from the ground, Itsuki addressed Harold in an informal manner different from up until now.
Receiving those words, even Harold's mouth curved, and in a voice as though he was somewhat enjoying it, he replied.

「Fuhn, try it. If you can keep up to my speed that is」

「I'll show it to you」

Because that was the courtesy he had to show towards Harold who wished for a serious battle.
With the match about to be restarted, the tension from before intensified much more. When Tasuku was about to cut into that mood, he received a glance from both Harold and Itsuki.

『We know』

The gazes which seemed to complain together.
We'll obey the presented conditions, and yet even with that we'll fight seriously. That's why don't stop us.
Tasuku who felt as though he was told that, after hesitating, retracted his right foot which had gone forward. Confirming that, different from up until now, Itsuki showed Harold his original gentle smile.

「Here I come!」

Those words became the signal to restart.
They started moving almost at the same time. However as expected, Harold was

faster. But the one who made the first move was Itsuki as he had declared.

Harold’s speed was already superior to Itsuki’s. But if he knew that and concentrated, he wouldn’t lose sight of Harold’s figure.
And from the 1st time’s face off, Itsuki formed a hypothesis that Harold’s speed might not be only linear. The basis for that was because Harold himself wanted to experience combat. He judged that Harold most probably lacked combat experience itself. This meant that it was hard to think that a person who lacked experience, in other words an inexperienced person would be able to move around as they pleased with that much speed or would be able to mix in feints with their attacks.

Itsuki’s conjecture hit bull’s-eye. He instantly predicted where Harold’s destination would be, and the slash he fired off at the empty space became a counter that attacked Harold who appeared there.

「Tsk!」

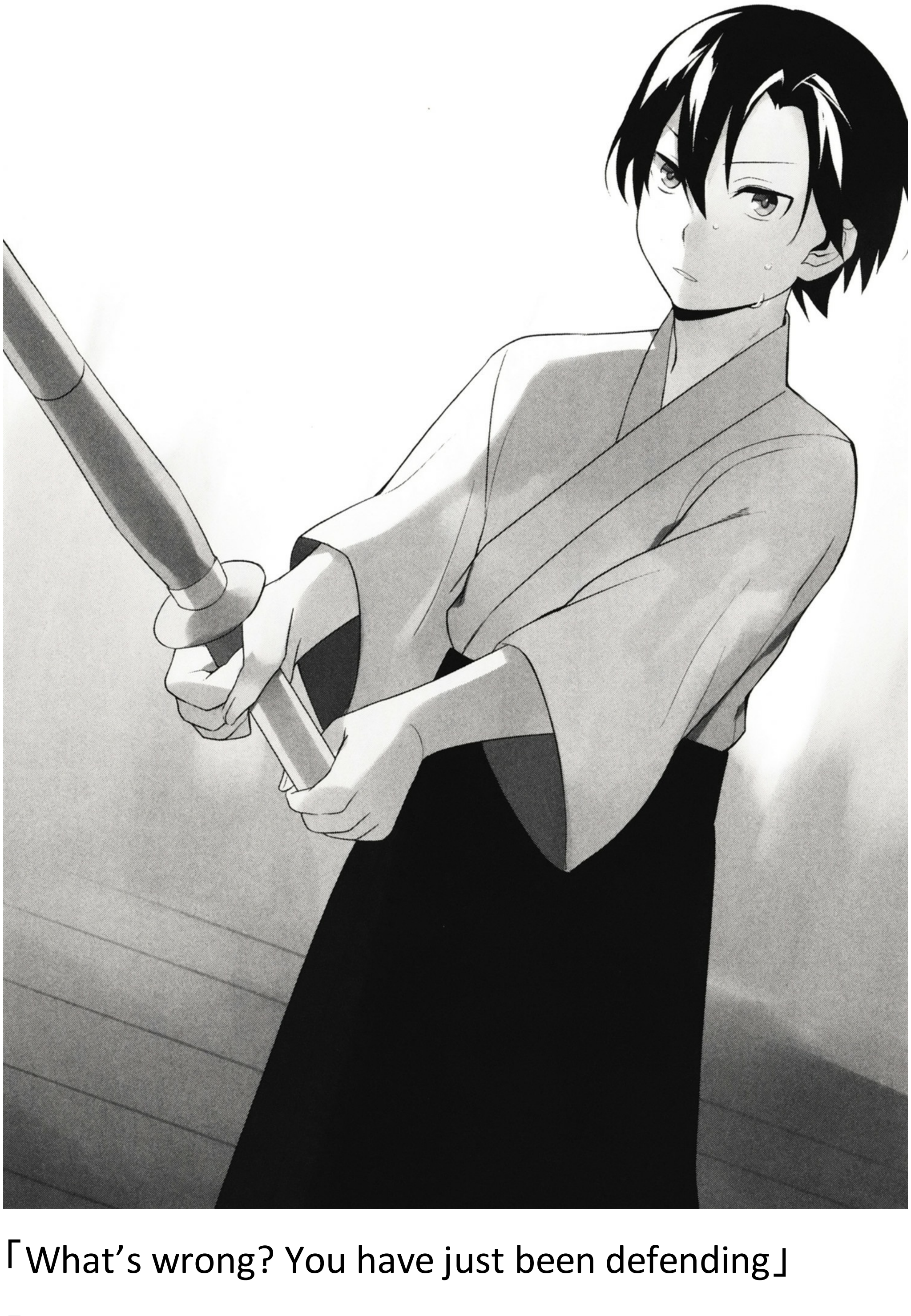
Against that strike which wouldn’t be odd if it had settled the battle, Harold defended due to his superhuman reaction speed. But because of that, his feet had stopped.
This was Itsuki’s aim. Without letting go of the chance to win brought forth, he showered attacks on Harold.

Even for Harold who had confidence in his speed, with the gap being close enough to trade blows, he couldn’t use the rush he had shown during the start. That said, even if he tried to take some distance, Itsuki closed the gap between them to prevent him from doing so.

If it were simply battling using sword techniques, Itsuki held the advantage. Harold was fundamentally an amateur and on top of that when he wasn’t able employ the speed used by his legs, his sword speed fell remarkably, and Itsuki wasn’t troubled dealing with his attacks which became too linear.

Conversely, since Harold’s eyes were too good, he reacted for each and every feint. Since he hadn’t cultivated something like “reading the flow” during a battle at all, his body ended up being pulled around by his exceptional kinetic vision. When that was the case, the scales of victory gradually tilted towards Itsuki’s side. Aiming to hit Itsuki’s torso, when he swung his shinai, it was

prevented by Itsuki blocking with his shinai, and like that itself they locked swords and started pushing at each other.
Finally, Harold’s feet came to a complete standstill.



「What’s wrong? You have just been defending」

「Your breathing is getting ragged and seems to painful」

「That could be said for the both of us」

Contesting strengths, Itsuki who was 10 cm taller held the advantage. Being repelled back as though he was pushed away, the instant Harold’s posture crumbled a bit, Itsuki’s body suddenly sank.

Harold instinctively realized that this blow would be unavoidable. Even if he wanted to defend with the shinai, in the state where his torso was inclined backwards, he wouldn’t be able to properly defend.
The most he could do was to get pursued when he became defenseless after his shinai was knocked away.

(Got you!)

Harold tried to intercept the slash aimed at his left torso with the shinai held in his right hand. It was impossible to prevent the attack which had his whole body weight behind it, defense was just some poor and vain struggle.
Itsuki sent that shinai flying– should have.

「Eh?」

Involuntarily leaking out such a voice right in the middle of a match was because, no matter how inadequate Harold’s posture was, the resistance given by the flicked shinai was too small, as though he had swung at empty air. It was because he’d gotten an impression like that.
Which wasn’t surprising, because the instant both their shinai collided, Harold released his shinai.

The shinai which was launched up easily revolved in midair, and because of that a blank space for a small instant was formed. A fatal gap when one’s eyes and consciousness strayed away from one’s opponent by a little in a battle.
As Itsuki thought “Not good”, simultaneously his right shoulder was hit by an impact.

『Heavy Palm Knock』[3]
It was a technique which appeared in the story, an unarmed combat technique which dealt damage by a palm strike. Originally, it was technique which was used in combination with normal attacks, and it wasn’t an attack by which an enemy could be defeated if used alone.
But for a defenseless opponent, it could at least knock them down, literally.

「Guu!」

Unable to endure the impact of the palm strike, Itsuki fell down face up.
Even with his back being struck by the ground, the next thing he saw when he

immediately tried to raise his body and rearrange his stance was Harold's figure who had caught the shinai which was falling down and pointing its end at his neck.

「That's it!」

The referee's call which announced the conclusion echoed out in the dojo. With that as the signal, the dojo regained its silence. The only thing that could be heard was Harold and Itsuki's ragged breathing.

One was looking up, while one was looking down.
In a composition which was easy to understand, while looking at Harold whose grim expression still hadn't changed, Itsuki accepted his defeat.
As expected, it was frustrating to lose. Right before the match began, him thinking that there was no way he would lose to a boy 3 years younger than himself increased his frustration.

But different to that, the feeling of fulfillment which he couldn't obtain until now was satisfied. I finally obtained the thing I've always wanted-he was experiencing a floating feeling like that.

(So this is the thing where we mutually cultivate each other, a rival, huh. Although I lost, it doesn't feel bad)

Let alone feeling bad, he was even feeling refreshed.

「Aah, I'm tired. Can you lend me a hand?」

「I don't remember knocking you down so hard that you wouldn't be able to stand. Due to sheltered upbringing, your endurance isn't enough」

Towards Harold who extended his hand even while being cynical, Itsuki smiled.

「I'll retrain from the basics. That's why let's have a rematch again」

「Fuhn, I won't lose to you again. I'll repay this debt for sure」

「What do you……….」

Harold was speaking as though Itsuki had won. When he saw that Itsuki didn't understand, Harold muttered「Idiot」and replied with displeasure.

「To think that you were a bird brain who didn't even sufficiently grasp the rules of the match. It was stated beforehand that the “weapons are shinai”. Do you think that the last attack, the palm strike, which knocked you down was an attack from the shinai?」

「………」

Listening to Harold, not only Itsuki, but all the people who were watching the match were at a loss for words. Certainly, if it was like that, then it would be Harold’s loss by disqualification.
But it could be said that Harold who reacted instantly when he was cornered was splendid. At the very least, everybody present here thought so, and nobody would object that it was he who won.

Except for Harold who had won.

「Ku, haha…….」

As a result, Harold who bluntly stated that as though it was obvious, appeared to be too straightforward, stoic and more than anything pure, so Itsuki unintentionally laughed.
Due to that, Harold’s displeasure grew even more.

「What’s so funny?」

「No, I just thought that you are strong」

「Is that sarcasm, you bastard. I’ll rip that tongue off」

「Don’t say such a scary thing」

It couldn’t be helped that Itsuki enjoyed even this trivial talk.
Turning towards the direction from where he suddenly felt a gaze, his little sister with a reproachful expression on her face entered his sight. He didn’t even need to think about what that meant.

(Well well, it seems as though we’ve exchanged places. Harold-kun might have the charm to draw people)

He was jealous at his little sister being taken away, but before he realized it, his sister was jealous of him. At such a ridiculous situation, Itsuki felt like laughing more and more.
As one would expect, if he were to do that, Harold seemed as though he would

seriously get angry, so he somehow endured it, and in one corner of his head, he thought of something like this.

(Harold-kun is a rival and my brother-in-law, huh………Such a future might not be bad)

Author –

I thought of splitting the fight with Itsuki into 2 parts, but since I couldn't find the right place to cut it, I finished it in a single chapter.
And because of that the gap (between chapters) became a bit more, but since it was somewhat longer than usual, please give me a break.
Or rather, the description of the battle is so poor that it is terrible.

TL –

1. Shinten – Collectively, sacred texts of the Shintō religion of Japan.
2. The clothes used in Japanese archery clubs are like those.
3. Don't know what else to call it. Please comment if you have better translations. The kanji- (剛打掌)

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Episode 21

Even in his dreams Harold didn’t think that the opponent who was openly baring his hostility just before the match was thinking of such things now, but still he sensed that Itsuki’s mood had changed and he was puzzled at that sudden change.
Well he might just be in a good mood since he won-he came to this conclusion which was completely off the mark.

(Or rather I lost. What”I don’t feel like losing at all”)

And that too he lost by disqualification against a kid. It was more pitiful than losing normally.
He was thinking that perhaps this high-spec body excelled at some flag collection ability.

As though sweeping away that worst possible case which crossed his mind, he shook his head 2 to 3 times, and wishing to puck up his mood which had sunk by breathing fresh air, his feet headed outside the dojo.
Instead of going outside the entrance from which he came in, he went towards the opening which was connected to the changing room, and stood under the blue sky.

While bathing in the comfortable wind which felt good against his perspiring body, he continued barefoot on the the white stone pavement which was laid down beautifully.
From the dojo which had its entrance set up on a hill, there was an unbroken view of the Sumeragi’s town.

The townscape which resembled old Japan spread out below the cliff. The buildings which were spread out were only wooden ones and there were no buildings which were high enough to cut across sky. Here and there, nature was overflowing, and as though to color them, pink petals were fluttering about.
Although it wasn’t a scenery he was particularly familiar with, it was without a doubt one which directly stimulated a Japanese person’s nostalgia.

Maybe that was the trigger.

The time since he came to this world was approximately 5 months.
Remembering about his home world which came across his mind, his tear glands slackened and his vision became blurred.
As though that was the signal for the burst, Harold's mind was attacked by a wave of emotions in succession.

The feeling of solitude being far away from his hometown, the future that awaited him, always steeling himself to maintain the tension, and yet carrying the inexhaustible factors of unease-all of these which combined into anxiety.
Even if it was a world similar to the game he loved, there were limits for enjoyment. The mental anxiety of living as a character before he knew it, who would die if the world flowed according to history, wasn't ordinary.

Harold was inwardly writhing at the various feelings rising up and twisting around. Being unable to endure, tears finally flowed out from his eyes and left their traces along his cheek.
Honestly, he would have broken down and cried out at the unreasonable situation he was placed in.

But the reason he stopped at crying silently was because of the high pride of the original work's Harold. Or rather, the Harold who had a personality of not accepting defeat even if he died being reduced to crying showed how cornered he was currently feeling.

「……….As if I'd stand losing」

Even though he was like that, only these words came out of his mouth. Even if he wanted to whine, sticking to pride so stubbornly was actually magnificent-Harold was thinking of such things in the corner of his mind where there was some composure was present. If it weren't for this steel like mental toughness, Harold might have already broken.

While thinking of these sentimental things, he was gazing at the cherry-blossom petals fluttering about the Sumeragi's town. And before long, his heart started to gradually calm down. While thinking of returning back to the dojo soon, as he was about to turn around, he was called out.

「Harold-sama」

As soon as that voice reached his ears, his heart started palpitating. Obviously,

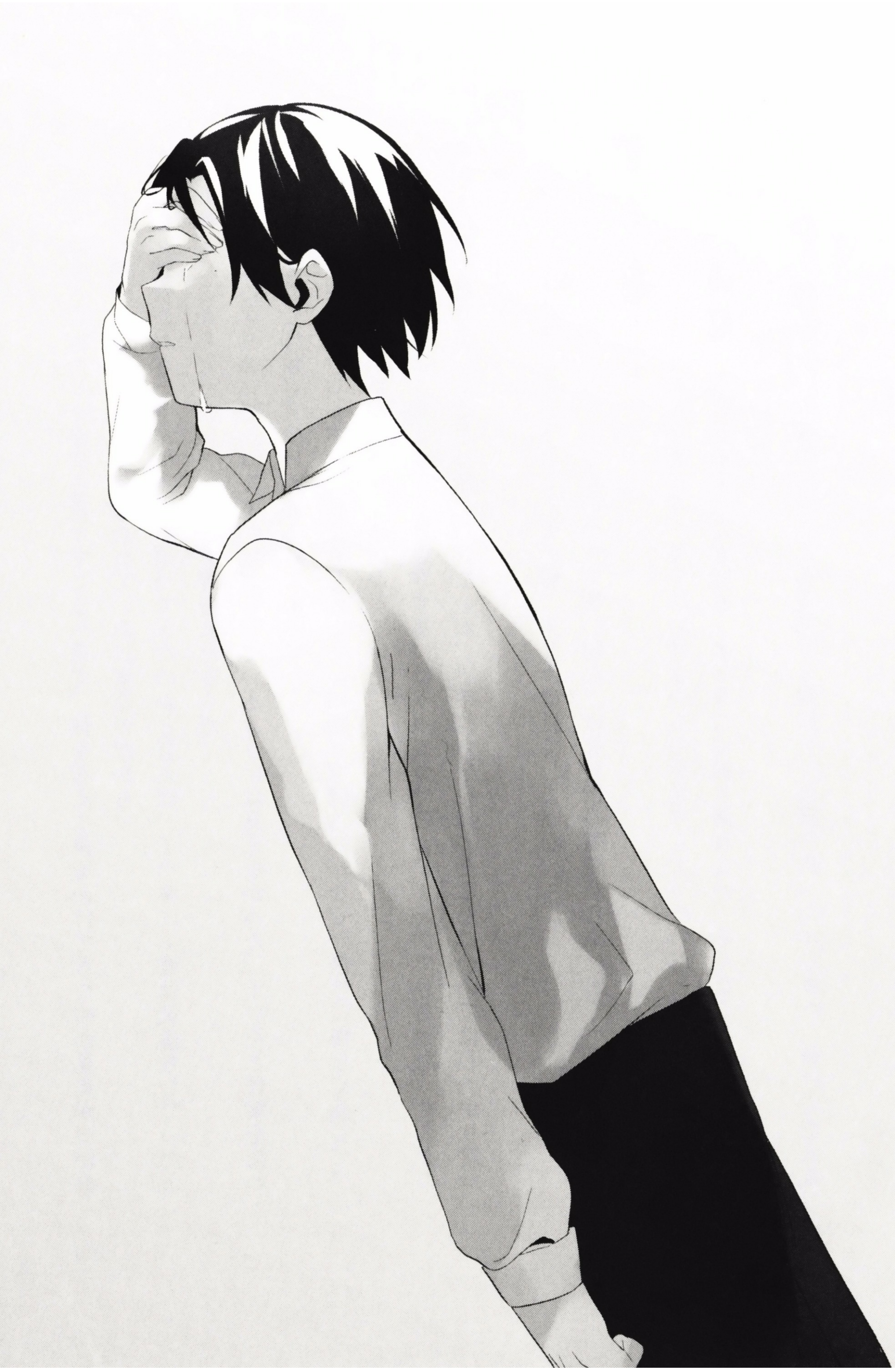
it wasn't due to feelings of love.
It was because he didn't know what to do when nothing good could be expected at all when this person came into contact with him.

When he turned around with movements as though he were a corroded tin toy[1], the figure that was there was unmistakably Erika's.
But Harold had no idea as to what Erika was thinking to come here or why she had called him out. Because he should be completely hated by her.

Well, his perception that he was hated in itself was wrong. The reason why she purposely came looking for Harold was because her back was pushed by Itsuki saying -「It seemed like he was discouraged so how about you go and console him?」.
Honestly speaking, it didn't look like Harold was feeling dispirited to Erika. She even received the impression that the way he was talking to Itsuki seemed to be easygoing.
As a matter of fact, at how Itsuki was speaking as though he could sense Harold's true feelings, she felt exceedingly annoyed, and by the time she realized it, her feet were already heading towards Harold.

But when she thought about it carefully, this was the ideal time to apologize to him. According to Tasuku's intentions, she couldn't inform that the misunderstanding had been solved, but she should still properly apologize for slapping him.
At the time when she was about to compromise with him, Erika ended up seeing it.

His right hand had covered both his eyes while he was facing the sky, but there was a single tear which flowed through the gaps of his fingers and down his cheek.



Erika’s feet stopped in panic. She instantly understood that she had seen something that she shouldn’t have. The reason for crying, the emotions behind the tears, Erika couldn’t understand at all. Since she didn’t know Harold well enough to do that.

With the shocking scene of Harold shedding tears in front of her, a small muttering of “As if I’d stand losing” reached Erika’s ears.
Harold, a boy of the same age as herself, might have always kept fighting like this.

Always confident and wearing that fearless smile which was like him, he might have been crying secretly, and he might have always been contending against adults without making his true motives known.

Only being strong wouldn't be enough, and only being intelligent wouldn't make one win. If one didn't have an indomitable spirit to push aside adversities, they wouldn't be able to behave like him.

Erika keenly realized at this time that what her father had said was true.
And she finally realized that she was misunderstanding a thing. She had thought that Harold was a person who wouldn't crumble no matter what the predicament was and would be able to easily overcome them, and that his confidence came out as his usual haughtiness.

However there was no way Harold would have only strength. Harold too was a child of the same age as her. Naturally, he would also have his weak parts.
It was just that he was pretending to have that haughty attitude so thoroughly that his surroundings wouldn't realize about such an obvious thing. Since there was no person to whom he could show his weak appearance, he couldn't help but behave like that.

Realizing Harold's circumstance, the only thought that came to Erika's mind was that she didn't want to leave him, who was trying to be alone by his own choice, alone.

(……..This might be what Father was talking about, about how I should "Become a person who can truly understand Harold")

If that was the case, it became clear as to what she had to do. She wouldn't hesitate anymore.
Even if she didn't have the qualifications right now, even if there were many things she still didn't have, she would surely become a person who could someday support that scarred back. Today was the first day she etched that resolution onto herself. As soon as she decide that, she felt as though her heart became unburdened.

That was why she was able to call his name without getting worked up. After he was called, Harold slowly turned around. His eyes were filled with suspicion. Certainly, when she thought about his mental state, she could understand why he was making such eyes. But Erika had already sworn that she wouldn't falter at that attitude anymore.

「The match just now was wonderful. Even with me, who is ignorant about swordsmanship, I could understand that Harold-sama is strong」

「You siblings, have you come to rub salt on the wound?」

「Not at all. Isn't it something like you lost in the battle but won in the war」

「I see, you came to pick a fight, huh?」

Harold had lost that match by disqualification. If conforming to that saying, then it would be that he lost in the battle and also in the war.
It could only be thought of as purposely taunting him, saying that with a dazzling smile.

「Pff..........I'm extremely sorry. I said too much」

It seemed as though Erika also was aware of it.
But more than that, for Harold it baffling at how naturally Erika was talking to him. On top of that, in this exchange too, she wasn't feminine.

「Hmph, if you want to say some worthless nonsense, then play around with your servant or something」

「Please wait」

Erika blocked Harold's path when he wanted to leave this place as fast as possible.
The agitation at not being able to read Erika's aim turned into irritation and his mouth became even more severe.

「Move, I don't have any time for you. Even if there were, I'd crush them all」

「However, in that case I won't be able to talk properly with Harold-sama」

「Right, which is convenient」

「Unfortunately, I can't let that happen. At least only for now, please spare me some of your time」

Erika's appearance from which only gracefulness like a flower could be felt until now, for some reason he felt her to be unshakeable like a big tree with deep roots in the ground. In short, it didn't feel as though she would move even an inch.
So this is the pressure from a character of the game, huh-Harold losing to that

clicked his tongue, and with his sullen aura in full throttle, he spoke to her.

「……….If you have any business, quickly finish it」

「Thank you very much」

Saying that, Erika bent her waist and took a posture of bowing deeply.

「I'm really sorry for the other day. Even though I was angry, it was wrong for me to hurl insults and also raise my hand. I'd like to apologize」

「Ha, you expressly came here say something like that? Pointless」

Though his words were cold, it wasn't a lie that they were his true feelings. Harold had intentionally angered Erika, and that reaction was appropriate. Normally, one wouldn't think to apologize for it. It was because she was Erika that she had come like this to apologize.

It wasn't a mistake that that kindness was her virtue. She was considered likeable by a majority of the people. Truthfully, it was the same with Harold when he was a player.
But for the Harold now, he could only think of that excessive kindness as fangs with deadly poison. It was a deadly existence where once bit by them, it might become fatal.
She was flourishing a very selfish kindness. When he was thinking like that, his mouth opened.

「There is no value in your apology. Rather, even though you cried so assertively, apologizing right after you said that, are you a real idiot? In the first place, that kindness of yours is a deception which comes from good will. On top of being nasty, it's nothing more than nauseatingly lukewarm feeling of being friendly. And it is up to you to dance around like a clown like that, but don't get in my way. Don't get in my sight. You're an eyesore and like the extremity of unpleasantness」

In addition to the foulmouthed nature of the original Harold, the resentment against Erika that had accumulated erupted out in one go. After throwing all that abuse, he regained his composure. He completely said too much. Furthermore, he was venting out his anger on her.
For a reason differing from before, he wanted to cry.

Showered with abusive words while being in the posture of apologizing, there was not even the slightest movement from Erika. Did I make her cry, or else did I make her angry-while he was observing timidly, Erika quietly raised her body.

Neither was she expressing anger nor was she tearful. That said, she also wasn't dispirited at being overwhelmed by those words.
What was there was a calm expression like a holy maiden's in a painting as though she had accepted all of Harold's abusive words.

Erika had already resolved herself in advance knowing that Harold would show an attitude like this regarding her apology. Because she knew that he was a person who was strong and severe, and also was a person who possessed true kindness, different from her. There were no lies mixed in those abusive words towards Erika. She was aware without even there being a need to be told that she was an existence that was a minus for Harold.

(The things that I don't have are too much. The strength to fight against a difficult fate, and the kindness to scold the weak)

From the start she had been mistaken. Lending a hand wasn't the only type of kindness. Watching over, thrusting away, doing nothing was also a type of kindness. For the sake of that person, so that they would grow.
But to actually put that into practice, the strength to believe in the other party was necessary. The person who would be able to support Harold would also be a person like that.

That's why no matter how severe she would accept Harold's words which pointed out at her inexperience, and only by using this as the source to grow would she become an existence who would be able to truly understand and support him. This was just the first step.

「………Hmph」

Harold left the place as though he had lost his interest.
Erika spoke towards that small back which had disappeared into the dojo.

「I won't say "Please wait for me". But I'll catch up to you for sure. There's absolutely no way that I'd leave you alone」

Erika's muttering was carried by the wind together with the cherry-blossom petals and went away towards the blue sky.

TL –

1. Buriki Ningyou – Japanese vintage tin toy produced in large numbers after World War 2.

Felt like I was in some cringe-fest while translating the latter half

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Episode 22

「Say old man, how much more time until we reach?」

While being rocked by the carriage used by the general public which was being pulled by 2 horses, a young boy with his eyes sparkling asked his father who was sitting next to him. That fidgety and nervous behavior looked as though he couldn’t wait to reach his destination.
Towards that, the boy’s father as though wanting to hold back his impatient son, replied.

「Very soon, so be quiet」

「That’s all you’ve from some time ago! I’m tired of hearing ‘Very soon’」

「But I’m tired of hearing Liner’s “how much more time?”」

On the opposite side of the boy’s father, inevitably sitting in the fetal position with a cramped posture, a blonde haired girl spoke to the red haired boy as though she was exasperated.
It took the form of the boy, Liner, being remonstrated by the 2 of them. But there was a reason for him to act like this.

「It’s the first time we’re going to a city, right? Aren’t you excited?」

Being brought up in a countryside village called Brosch, which was surrounded by mountains, if it were to be called as going afar, Liner had only gone to villages and towns in the vicinity. But this time was different. He had come out of the territory for the first time since being born.

「Even if you call it a city, it’s just Delfit. It’s not like we’re going to the capital and if you are so excited it’ll be completely obvious that you’re a bumpkin」

「Well, Brosch is rural」

「That wasn’t what I meant………」

It was a lively conversation, but there was nobody paying attention to it. From the start, the carriage was crowded with people and all of them were chatting as they pleased so the people who paid any attention to this conversation were

non-existent.
But among them, there was a man who seemed to be in the prime of his life, having a good physique and an abundant beard, saw that conversation and started talking to Liner's father.

「Do you people come from Brosch?」

「Yes. Do you know Brosch?」

「It's the village which is at the edge of the territory governed by Viscount Ballack, right?」

「You seem to be well informed」

「Since I'm somewhat friendly with him」

Saying that, the man tipped his empty hand towards himself in front of his mouth. Liner's father understood what he wanted to say by looking at that action.

「It's related to alcohol, huh」

「Right! If you talk about 『Bale's brewery』, it is well known locally in its own way」

'Gahahaha'- The man laughed in a hearty manner which fit his appearance.

Viscount Ballack was famous for being a matchless alcohol lover. If the people living in the territory were asked about it, they would have heard at least once about the rumors that he would drink alcohol every night as though he were bathing in it or that he would often visit the bars in the town for a drink.
According to Bale, the Viscount was living in the town where Bale was running the brewery, before he started governing. It seemed that he had liked the alcohol from Bale's brewery from that time itself, and even after he became the Viscount, he had been buying from the brewery regularly.

But although the monetary transaction was appropriate, it was hard to say that his town was close to the Ballack territory. And so, he was now in the middle of expanding his business in the Ballack territory after the sale.
He said that although he still hadn't gone to Brosch, he knew its name and the geography around it.

「But still, if its from Brosch, you are coming pretty far. Is Delfit your destination? It isn’t very suitable for bringing children to sightsee」

Port city Delfit. As its name indicated, it was a town which spread out facing the ocean, and where fishing and trade were prosperous.
A majority of the part in contact with the sea was the port, so the traffic of ships was quite large and it wasn’t as though there was a beach for enjoying in the sea. It would be a different matter if one went towards the coastline a small distance away from the port where there were no ship lanes, but in that area monsters were usually present. There were passenger boats which went around the sea, but looking at Liner and the 2 of them, they didn’t appear to be prepared for enjoying the boat trip which would take longer than 3 months. In that case, they might have come to savor the marine products.

「It’s not for sightseeing but for participating in the fighting tournament!」

Towards Bale’s question, Liner decisively declared so.
Delfit was a port city — in other words, it was a town of fishermen. Therefore, there were a lot of men who were vigorous and proud of their strength.

Maybe with that spirit as the origin, from olden days a fighting tournament was held every year in Delfit.
Although it was held with a front that it would help in maintaining the security of maritime activities, its origin was due to people who wanted to give vent to the anger piled up normally or simply those who wanted to go wild, gathering and holding it, but the compatibility of this violent event with the people living in Delfit was extraordinarily good.

As the years went by, the number of participants increased and even the scale expanded rapidly. By the time 20 years had passed from its start, even an exclusive stage was prepared and now not only from Delfit, but also from the surrounding cities, participants appeared and it had become a specialty.
Come to think of it, it was already that season, huh-while being convinced, Bale closely stared at the enthusiastic Liner and spoke.

「Fighting tournament, huh. You?」

「Wh, what? That reaction」

「It isn’t that you are weak but it’s just that Delfit’s fighting tournament is quite serious. Just be careful to not get a big injury」

「It's fine. Since I'll win!」

「Hou, that is some grand declaration」

「Well, he is participating in the under-13 division though」

Liner's father rubbed his head roughly. To that, Liner raised a voice of protest saying「Stop it-!」and tried to brush away his hand. Looking at that heart-warming scene, Bale couldn't feel the air of a strong person, one that would be able to win through the tournament, from him.
And while Liner was making a racket, suddenly the edge of his shirt was pulled and he turned his eyes towards the other side.

「What?」

「It's in sight, Delfit」

「Eh, really!?」

No sooner had it been said than Liner put not only his head, but half of his body outside the window and caught the city of Delfit in his vision.
It would be an exaggeration to say that they might reach the sky, but still he could see many tall buildings which weren't there in Lietze. There were many stalls along the highway they were moving on, and many of them were bustling with people who were going back and forth from the city.

Even though they had yet to enter the city, that too with it being in quite the distance, it was this lively. Liner's heart was dancing at the thought of how many unknown and unheard of things would be overflowing there when he stepped inside the city. Next to him, although the girl had an uninterested expression, maybe due to being interested she was repeatedly glancing outside the window.

「Oo, incredible-!」

「Liner, don't make so much noise! And it's dangerous so draw back!」

「It's fine! Wow, what's that?」

After arriving at the long-awaited city of Delfit, Liner's tension kept increasing. Eventually, Liner's excitement continued increasing until they entered inside and got off the carriage.

And when he stood on top of Delfit’s ground on his own feet, that voltage reached its peak.

「The number of people are large! The buildings are huge! There’s a steel ship!」

「That’s a statue of a ship!」

For the time being, Liner was shouting out whatever he saw . Even looking at the monument of a huge ship in the middle of a fountain at the central plaza, he couldn’t hide his excitement.
Looking at him, the people in the town were laughing at him as though watching something pleasant. Liner was in such high spirits that he didn’t even notice the surrounding situation, but for the 2 people with him, it was considerably embarrassing.

「Hey Liner, you’re too excited! We have to quickly go register for the participation」

「That and all is for later! I’ll go towards the sea and come back!」

「Aah………come on!」

As soon as Liner, who wasn’t able to keep still, was stopped he left those words behind and started running.
That figure soon mixed within the crowd of people and disappeared.

「Good grief, he’s as excited as always……… I’ll complete the registration so I’ll leave him to you. After you catch him, we’ll assemble in front of this fountain」

「Okay, understood」

They had to inevitably split in 2 directions.
The boy called Liner, once freed, would play and move around forever until he became tired. He had gone towards the harbor to look at the sea for now, but it wasn’t known where he would head to next. It was obvious that things would get problematic if she didn’t chase after him immediately.

While sighing, she jogged after him, moving as though weaving through the crowd. It was a feat she could do only because she was a child who had a small build and was nimble and agile.
Although, it was a first for her, who was from the same village as Liner, also to

see such a sea of people. And then, she collided with a figure coming from around the street corner.

「Kyaa!」

Due to the impact of colliding, she involuntarily fell on her backside. Since the other person had been walking, luckily she didn't seem to be injured. But that was only regarding herself. Wanting to confirm the safety of the other person, she got up.

「S, sorry! Are you alright?」

「Yes, I'm fine」

That refreshing voice reached the girl's ears without being drowned out by the bustling crowd.
That itself was something that could fascinate people, but after she saw that the owner of that voice was a girl whose age wasn't much different that hers, she caught her breath.

(C, cute……!)

There was no sarcasm, and moreover it was her frank impression.
Until a position a bit below the shoulders, glossy black hair was gathered. White transparent skin like porcelain. Pupils with the same color as the hair, which held some oriental charm.
Contrary to the immaturity, the appearance of the girl who had a grown up atmosphere was so beautiful that one wouldn't doubt it if she was described using the word『Bishoujo*』.

「Are you yourself fine? You seem to be somewhat in a daze……」

「Eh?……..Ah, Sorry! It's nothing! Umm, are you really not injured anywhere?」

What should I do if there are some scratches on such a beautiful girl? – This black-haired girl was beautiful enough to make her harbor such thoughts which were close to being fearful for her.

「Don't be so worried. She instantly held me so I didn't even fall」

「She?」

Because her eyes were stolen by the black-haired girl she hadn't realized, but

behind the girl there was woman in the former half of her twenties with chestnut colored hair, wearing a cooking outfit.
Must be her attendant. When she looked closely, she noticed that the black-haired girl was wearing a splendid dress which she hadn't seen before now. Without a doubt, she was a noble.

「Come to think of it, weren't you in a hurry?」

「Ah, that's right. But…….」

She wanted to chase after Liner. But it would feel awkward if she didn't apologize properly.
Maybe due to sensing that conflict, a kind smile, one which made those who looked at it be at ease, floated up on the black-haired girl's face.

「Don't mind me. Rather, this means that the both of us were fated to meet」

「Fated to meet……..」

「If this is a strong bond, we'll be able to meet again someday. That's why, when we reunite again……….let's see, please become my friend」

「F, friend?」

Listening to the completely unexpected request, her eyes became like saucers.

「You don't want to?」

「N, n, not at all! Rather, is it fine with someone like me……..」

「If we are to meet again, it'll be proof that our bond is real, so isn't it natural that we become friends?」

「Is that……..so?」

「Yes. And so, could you hold your current feelings until our reunion?」

「Y, yes!」

Honestly, she couldn't understand the girl's point, but for some reason she was able to readily accept it.
Maybe it was due to the girl's charm.

「Well then, let's meet again somewhere. Let's go, Juno」

「Yes ～」

Within the city where people kept moving without any break, the black-haired girl and her attendant-like woman left with calm footsteps.
After that, she came back to her senses and secured Liner, and by the time she came back to the fountain while dragging him, the sun had started to sink.

Normally, she would have been scolding Liner for causing trouble, but only today, due to meeting that mysterious girl her feelings somewhat hazy.
She couldn't properly put it in words, but it was as though the gears of destiny had started to turn, that kind of feeling which could be called as neither anxiety nor upliftment.

While she was still having that kind of somewhat murky feeling, the next morning came. Since it was the day of the fighting tournament, Liner, who was 3 times more energetic than his usually excessively energetic self, went ahead to the venue, and she had a shocking encounter which couldn't be compared to yesterday's.

No, accurately speaking, that wasn't an encounter but a "reunion".

It was when the participants for the under-13 fight, including Liner, were gathered at the room next to the stage, when they were waiting for their names to be called out.
When she was waiting for the tournament to start and Liner to make an appearance, she saw a figure which made her doubt her own eyes.

That figure, which she couldn't have forgotten from that day 3 years ago, was called by a name different from the one in her memories.
There was no way she would mistake the appearance of the person who had saved her life. He was taller and the masculinity of his features had increased, but the vestiges of that day were still markedly left.

By chance, his eyes perceived the girl. Those deep crimson pupils which expressed a strong will were the same as those on that day.
Their eyes met, and she caught her breath. Their gazes intersected only for a single instant. As he moved his gaze, she breathed out as though she had just remembered about the air accumulated in her lungs. Together with that, the blonde-haired girl– Colette Amerel spoke out the name of the boy, who had

carried out the reunion, as though she were chewing on it.

「…….Harold, sama」

TL –

I left it as Bishoujo since any other translation wouldn’t do justice. Sorry for the amount of pronouns. The author didn’t use their names at all.

Delfit is [デルフィト] – Derufito. Liner is [ライナ] – Raina. Colette’s last name is [アメレール]- Amereru. I previously translated it as Emerel. Any suggestions are welcome.

Episode 23

「Don’t go from the front! Split to the sides and counter-attack!」

In one corner of the normally quiet and peaceful vast expansive grassland, a loud bellow resounded as though tearing through that atmosphere.
The owner of the voice was a robust man, wearing an armor with white as its undertone, who was issuing orders without any break to about 40 soldiers under his command. But the Horn Head’s roar easily drowned out his voice.

‘Guoooon’- Ringing out through the ground, it was a low and heavy cry which shook the core of the body. The lead colored body was 5 meters long and even it’s height exceeded 2 meters, and moreover its feature was the long, thick and rustic horn emerging from its head, from which its name originated. Horn Head was a frenzied monster which would charge using its horn and head hardened to resemble stone, as its weapon. It’s appearance was similar to a large rhino wearing iron armor.

Although it was omnivorous, it didn’t have any preference to prey on other animals including humans and other monsters. However, it was extremely territory conscious and since there were no monsters which could rival the Horn Head in strength in the surroundings, it had rapidly increased its influence and had extended its territory close to the sphere of human livelihood.
This was the reason they were currently confronting the Horn Head, wanting to subjugate it.

The biggest threat which was it’s rush had enough power to easily destroy a single house. If humans were to receive it directly, they probably wouldn’t remain alive.
Due to that, although they were trying to finish it by attacking from the sides the Horn Head was preventing them from doing so by swinging its long horn and tail to intimidate the surrounding soldiers.

Although it had suffered some wounds, they weren’t enough to dull its movements. And as the combat dragged on, some of the soldiers also started getting injured.

Fortunately, there was no one who got an injury serious enough for it to become an obstacle in the fight, but if they continued to fight in the current condition, eventually even casualties would occur. The captain of the soldiers was pondering about what to do. Suddenly, a small shadow noiselessly passed by beside him.

「P, please wait! It's dangerous!」

When the captain noticed this, he tried to stop the small shadow, but the boy's legs didn't stop.
Without even turning back, the boy addressed the captain.

「Anymore than this is a waste of time. Make all those guys fall back. They'll be nothing but a nuisance」

Listening to that indifferent tone, the man couldn't speak.
The employer of these soldiers was Hayden Stokes. His son, Harold, drew out the sword from the scabbard hanging at his waist. Different from the soldiers whose defense was strengthened by iron armor, Harold stood in front of the Horn Head while wearing a jacket, tight leather pants and boots which came up till his calves.

As the Horn Head stopped receiving attacks from all sides after the soldiers fell back, the Horn Head's eyes captured Harold's figure.
Against Harold who was calmly closing the distance with unfaltering footsteps, the Horn Head gave out a loud roar. Finally, there was a change in Harold's expression.

「It is said that weaker the dog, louder it howls」

It was neither fear nor nervousness but ridicule. Those eyes were completely looking down on the Horn Head.
That might have provoked it. While wildly howling again, the Horn Head charged at the existence which was much smaller than itself. The large figure drew near but Harold wasn't perturbed and didn't show any movement to indicate dodging it.

And the instant the distance between the 2 reduced to just a few meters, Harold moved forward.
Immediately a shrill sound resounded. The origin of it was when Harold's sword

and the Horn Head's horn collided the instant they crossed by. The things that conveyed the result of the clash were the Horn Head's cry, different from before, which was filled with pain and the horn, which symbolized it, that had been cut off at the root.

「If I'm not mistaken, blacksmiths will swarm around this guy's horn. Well, it'll only become loose change, but retrieve it」

Harold didn't even spare a glance at the Horn Head which was suffering in agony. It was as though from the start, the Horn Head hadn't even been in his eyes.
But although it was a painful blow, it wasn't fatal. The Horn Head put power into its bent limbs and stood up.

Anger was present in those eyes. As though it wanted to strike with its rage, it howled thrice.

「T, that is!?」

Towards the Horn Head's change, a single soldier raised a surprised voice. A Golden yellow light surrounded its huge body. That was a magic formation.

There were 2 categories of monsters that could use magic. They were either the species that innately excelled at using magic or those which were the strongest within their respective species and had acquired magic during the process of their fast growth.
This Horn Head was the latter. This was proof of it having that much strength.

It raised both it's forelegs. As though it wanted to trample and smash the ground, it struck down with them.
With that as the starting point, fissures ran through the ground in a straight line towards Harold and the ground turned over.

『Grand Punisher』
Although it had an exaggerated name, this intermediate level magic was an earth system magic which would turn over the crust as though to trap and crush the target to death. It's power was high but since the the attack was linear it would be easy to see through it and if some distance was taken, it wouldn't be hard to evade it.
But against Grand Punisher, Harold charged from the front.

And he leaped just before getting swallowed by the walls of earth. While kicking the earth walls coming from both sides with his legs alternatively, he ran as though he were sprinting on air.
After crossing about 10 meters, in the end, Harold jumped remarkably high in the air. At a height from where he could look down at the Horn Head.

With a crackling sound, lightning clad the sword held by Harold.

「That's it for your useless struggle」

The sword which was clad with so much electricity that one would think it that the sword blade was shining, Harold swung it down without any hesitation.

「『Thunderbird』」

Instantly, with a roaring sound, a giant bird of lightning fired from the sword attacked the Horn Head as though wanting to swallow it.
The thunderbird, which held enough heat to burn off the eyes those who were watching, pierced the large body.

A bit later after Harold landed, the Horn Head fell down. Many places on the large body were burnt and roasted, and smoke was rising from the whole body. It didn't even twitch after falling down. The Horn Head's life had completely ended.

「With this, there's nothing more to do here. Quickly finish tidying up」

Without getting a single injury, without even breaking a sweat, Harold who had defeated a huge monster acted as though it was natural and returned back to the carriage. It meant that he had left retrieving the horn and disposing the corpse to them.

After Harold's figure disappeared as the carriage door closed with a snap, finally, the air enveloping them calmed down.
As though it was planned, all of them simultaneously breathed out.

「First squad, retrieve the horn. The remaining squads, dispose the corpse. Work quickly! It's a job suitable for us who bothered Harold-sama for something like this!」

So as to tighten the air that had loosened by a bit, orders from the captain flew out. Among the soldiers who were moving swiftly after receiving those orders, a new recruit in the first squad, which had been given the comparatively easy job of retrieving the horn, still couldn't believe the scene he had just seen and asked his senior.

「Was Harold-sama so strong?」

「Ah, come to think of it, it's the first time for you, huh」

'Then it's no wonder that you would be dumbfounded at that scene', saying that, the questioned soldier, Elias, smiled wryly.

「From about 3 years ago, Harold-sama started accompanying the subjugation expeditions. At that time itself, he was quite strong but now, it's as you can see」

「But is it alright? Even if he is strong, he is still the heir to the Stokes family, so if by some chance he were to get injured…………」

「Well, Captian's, and some other people's heads would fly. Physically」

While making a gesture of cutting his neck, Elias said so.
Towards the turbulent contents which were contrary to the indifferent manner in which it was said, the new recruit's spine froze.

「That's not at all fine……….」

「That's not the case. Eventually, even you'll understand」

Declaring so without any fear or anxiety, Elias lightly clapped the new recruit's back.
The new recruit still couldn't understand how Elias could behave in such a composed manner. But the more abundant a soldier's experience of fighting together with Harold was, the more deeper their trust became.

When Harold had wanted to go with the subjugation expeditions, at the start, even his parents had disapproved of it. For the parents who doted on their son, it was obvious to stop him.
But when he swung his sword lightly and used magic for a bit in front of their eyes, they readily gave their permission. It was because they were charmed by his excellent talent, and at the same time they anticipated that even the Stokes' fame would rise due to his strength.

Like this, Harold was permitted to accompany the expedition, but that was the first time he had fought with a monster. At the start, he had fought hard battles and had even got injuries which weren't small.

But when Harold was injured he had hid that fact from his parents. It was particularly bad when even though his bone had cracked, he behaved as though nothing had happened, and after leaving for the Sumeragi territory, he had come back only after his wound had healed a few days later.
Although, other than Harold nobody was aware of what it accurately meant, there were lives that were saved.

Originally, subjugation expeditions would be hounded by danger. Even if encountering strong monsters like the Horn Head this time was considered as being rare, receiving sever wounds in battle and dying weren't unusual at all.
But after Harold had started tagging along, people who got severe wounds reduced remarkably and there were no deaths at all.

This was because Harold himself would defeat most of the monsters, but although he would deny it, he was trying to protect the soldiers. The injury where his bone cracked had also happened when he had protected the soldiers who were about to be struck to death by monsters.
It was obvious that this time too, he had judged that some soldiers might get injured if the battle drew any longer.

The soldiers were glad for his consideration but more than that, they were also frustrated.They were protected by the one whom the had to protect. And that too he was still a child.
That's why there were many enthusiastic soldiers who had sworn to become strong enough to protect Harold. It also became motivation for them to train.

(I've acquired enough combat experience against the monsters that come out in this area. If possible, I want the expedition to go more farther, but I've to make sure that nobody gets injured. There's still a huge amount of monsters that I still haven't encountered so I want to collect the data quickly)

Even if it was known that the reason for Harold's behavior was entirely for making it more efficient to earn experience for him to survive, it wouldn't change the fact that the soldiers lives had been saved.

By the way, the reason he had hid the injury from his parents was because he thought that they would prohibit him accompanying the expedition if they came to know about it.

Like that, after piling up encounters with many people due many things, these 3 years had brought about a huge change in Harold. The prime changes were the improvement in his combat ability and his mental growth. Thanks to desperately continuing to fight, he could fearless confront and fight multiple monsters on his own, and could even safely defeat them.
But due to him looking forward to fights a bit too enthusiastically, he had become known as a battle junkie (Berserker), a symbol of fear, among the populace.

And one more thing, this wasn't Harold himself but the change that had occurred in his surroundings. The largest was Tasuku Sumeragi.
Due to his efforts, the day when LP farming could come under the sun became close.

Harold, who had returned to the Stokes mansion after finishing the expedition which took about 2 weeks, without even sparing much time to recover from his fatigue, jumped onto the carriage returning to the Sumeragi territory with Tasuku. Regarding this, his parents had conveniently interpreted it as him being passionate about Erika. His stomach became heavy thinking about what kind of reaction those 2 would have when this engagement was annulled, but thinking,'what will happen, will happen', he decided to forget about it.

「How were the negotiations?」

「They advanced without any issues. With this, we can seriously start working towards propagating it」

Tasuku answered while smiling towards Harold who had a sour look. Advancing successfully meant that as planned, the Stokes house were satisfied with taking the profits which were only there in front of their eyes.
Profits only meant that when LP farming was used the Stokes' farmhouses would be exempt from the contract fee and the utilization fee would be reduced, and also that a part of the tax collected based on the harvested amount would be returned to the Stokes house.

Due to this, the farmhouses in the Stokes territory could use LP farming with less burden. If LP farming which had a fast harvest cycle became popular, they would be in an advantageous position due to exporting it to other territories and countries, and due to the returns comparatively rising up, the populace would be able to pay the tax levied by the Stokes house without any delays.
From Hayden’s point of view, the revenue would rise even with him doing nothing, so he might have decided that there would be no need to forcibly get involved in the experimentation of LP farming. It wouldn’t be late even if they asked for the rights for joint ownership after Harold and Erika officially got married.

「To think the negotiations would go so easily」

Although it wasn’t something that the perpetrator who had devised everything should have said, he involuntarily sighed thinking of what a careless decision his father had made. And towards such a Harold, Tasuku saying, ‘That’s right’, started talking about a new topic.

「There’s a message from Itsuki to you」

「Is it another bout?」

「Ahaha, well, habitually without omitting, there is that too, but this time, there’s one more thing. ‘How about participating in the fighting tournament in Delfit?’, was his invitation」

He remembered about Delfit, and also the fighting tournament. Because in the narrative of『Brave Hearts』, there was an event of winning in Delfit’s fighting tournament.

(That was also one way to fight against human rival characters. It’s also fine to not seriously try to kill each other………)

This meant that it was a huge chance to obtain new combat experience. It was the best bait to fish the current Harold with.

「………Interesting. I’ll participate」

And so, Harold’s participation in the fighting tournament was determined.

Episode 24

Since Harold made the decision without even thinking about it, the rumors circulating in his territory about him being a battle junkie might not have been necessarily wrong. Although the danger was less, his resistance towards fighting becoming lower was also another change. This was the result of him coming to the clear decision that if it wasn't like this, he wouldn't survive.

「By the way, is your body alright? I heard that you fought against a huge Horn Head on this expedition」

「That again」

Maybe because Tasuku had asked the same question every time they met after Harold came back from an expedition, Harold's voice sounded completely fed up. But for Tasuku, or rather for the Sumeragi, in the past when they had thought that Harold had come to visit, he had been seriously injured. When they had encountered such a situation, although they came to know that he was strong, they were still extremely worried. Moreover, because it was the Harold who had wanted to conclude the matter saying, 「It's just a scratch」, they were all the more concerned.

Especially Erika, who on the surface didn't show any excessive concern by respecting Harold's feelings saying, 「Since Harold-sama himself has decided」, since she started to seriously practice healing magic from that day onwards, her honest emotions were that she couldn't simply sit still without doing anything. From the time Erika had started practicing healing magic, Harold hadn't gotten injured, and so as of yet her power hadn't healed any injuries of Harold. But still, Erika's devotion towards Harold, which was shown by her practicing healing magic diligently every single day, was real. Although, Harold hadn't realized it yet.

「Did you really think that I would lose to that small fry whose only characteristic was its large size? Speak only after you think」

「Saying that with Harold-kun's age itself is surprising」

「Even your son is like that though」

Itsuki, who had recently turned 16, too could easily defeat a Horn Head on his own. He was the only person who had enough ability to equal Harold in the same generation.
It was the same for Itsuki too, and so they would always compete by holding bouts frequently.

Although Itsuki had just been addressed as Erika's brother in the game and without even his name appearing in it, he was that strong. Most probably, there were still many formidable people unknown to Harold.
It was huge that at the current stage, he became aware that the overwhelming advantage of having the game's knowledge might become an obstacle.

When he took this into consideration, Harold thought that it was correct of him to deepen his relationship with the Sumeragi even if the risks increased.
Even with the prime unresolved problem, which was his relationship with Erika, there had been almost no progress at all since 3 years ago. He had blatantly kept a distance, and had conversed only when necessary while keeping it to the bare minimum.
There had been no fiance-like events at all.

(With this, it would be impossible to raise a flag, right?)

Things were going so favorably that he unintentionally wanted to laugh.
Although he couldn't be careless about the situation of the expanding miasma in the Sumeragi territory, only this had to be resolved by the protagonists, so he couldn't interfere. But still, with the introduction of the resistance drug and the experimental implementation of LP farming, it was true that the situation had become considerably better.
'That said, carelessness is one's greatest enemy. If I think about the future, there are piles of problems and before the start of the game 5 years from now, as much as possible I'll pluck those death flags that will eventually be raised from their roots!', thought Harold, as he once again strengthened his determination.

◇

On top of a square platform made of stone with sides of 20 meters, 2 people were exchanging intense sword strikes.
One of them was a boy who was approaching the transition period to his youth,

with a height reaching 180 cm and with black hair, which somewhat appeared to be tawny. His usually kind face to which the words pleasant youth would perfectly fit, had a grim expression.

Facing against the youth was a boy with a height of 160 cm, about a head shorter than the youth, with deep crimson pupils as his defining feature. While moving so intensely that his black hair, which was much more darker than the youth's became dishevelled, converse to those intense movements he had a sharp glint in his cold eyes and was dishing out sword strikes.
The 2 who had a close friendship would often cross swords to confirm each other's growth when they occasionally met.

「Haa, ha……….yeah, if it's like this, it seems as though you'll be alright even in the tournament」

Itsuki, who had moved away from the sword's range, lowered his sword while arranging his breathing.

「I don't need your concern」

「Only in the strength portion though. It's good that you have no problems in handling the fake sword」

「Don't make light of me. I'm not so weak that this amount of weight will become painful」

「If it's about that, I was worried whether you'd be able to hold back or not」

'Because there's practically nobody in the same generation who can react to Harold's sword', was Itsuki's opinion. If he had to say it, then it was consideration for the opponents who would end up fighting against Harold. Well, it was just needless anxiety about such matters of ability.

「Then, let's end it here for today. Since the plan is to depart tomorrow morning」

(Carriage again, huh. It can't be helped because Delfit is nearby, but I really want to board an airship)

Airship was something that appeared in the game, a wooden vehicle with an appearance similar to a ship, and it flew in the air. Its difference from a ship that

sailed on water was that there were wings that sprouted out from both sides of the hull and propellers were attached to the mast and the stern.
It was a vehicle that oozed out impressions of fantasy due to the stress placed on the design, but at the same time, it was unknown as to how it could fly stably with that shape.

Well, since it was powered by crystals[1], called 『Crystal[2]』, that monsters dropped when they were defeated, it wasn't something that could be explained using Science or Physics. By the way, when Crystals were used during compounding, they would be extremely useful in creating and enhancing weapons and armor.

「Ah, right, do you want to change your name for registering in the tournament? Almost everybody who participate in the tournament are commoners, so I think that your parents might not like you appearing in that kind of place」

「I don't know about that. Rather, they might say,"You did well in beating down those inferior species!", and get pleased」

No matter which, it wasn't a proper reaction.
In that case, if he changed his name and hid his identity, then even if the tournament winner's name entered his parent's ears, it wouldn't become troublesome.

「Anything is fine for the alias」

「Then I'll think of it while we travel」

Later on, Harold would stand on the stage with the name 『Mr.Lord』 that would involuntarily make him doubt Itsuki's naming sense.
Harold had no idea that such a future was awaiting him, but his suffering wouldn't end only at that.

The evening of the day they reached Delfit a few days after traveling. With the tournament being held the next day, after they checked into a lodge, when Harold walked to the joint restaurant accompanying Itsuki to have dinner, for some reason Erika was present.
Unintentionally, his body stiffened.

「Sorry, Erika, for being a bit late」

Without even minding Harold's thoughts, Itsuki sat down at the table where Erika was sitting. Harold glared at the both of them demanding an explanation, but even faster than that, Erika asked Itsuki

「Onii-sama, I heard that only the 2 of us will be eating together though?」

「That's right. It's not wrong that I invited you saying,"How about eating together once in a while?"」

「…….So it's like that」

Perceiving Itsuki's plan, Erika grumbled exasperatedly.
In short, Itsuki had invited Erika saying,"How about eating together (with Harold-kun) once in a while", while intentionally omitting the parenthesized words and making Erika misunderstand.

「If my presence is a nuisance, then should I leave?」

「Stay here」「Please stay」

Harold's and Erika's voices overlapped.
If Itsuki were to leave now, then Harold would have to eat while facing Erika. Frankly speaking, it would be hell.
It wasn't that Erika disliked it, but her feelings of not wanting to be a hindrance to Harold when she knew that he was keeping a distance from her, was strong.

Nevertheless, if she were to leave after she had already sat down only by looking at the other person's face, then it would be too rude. Even if the seat that she was invited to was a trap. Maybe it was because he had planned it after taking this personality of his little sister's into consideration, Itsuki's expression was saying,'I've done it'.

「……….Why is she here in Delfit?」

「Because there are chances of getting injured in the fighting tournament, I thought of making someone who could use healing magic accompany us. However, coincidentally since it was inconvenient to the people in the house, I reluctantly requested Erika」

It was extremely doubtful whether it was a coincidence or not.

Seeing that Erika, who had similarly been deceived, wasn't refuting, Harold wasn't satisfied with thinking that it might be true. He couldn't help but think that this situation was intentionally created.

「I won't get injured」

「There's a proverb – Well prepared means no worries. That's why I made Erika also accompany us」

「It should have been that I wouldn't make contact with Harold-sama any more than when absolutely necessary though」

「I decided that meeting face to face is a necessity. That way, you can move smoothly if something happens, right?」

It wasn't as though Itsuki was saying something odd, so they couldn't complain about it. In the end, with the situation being as though they were taken for a ride by Itsuki, the 3 of them sat around the table. It went without saying that there was no conversation between Erika and Harold. If Itsuki hadn't acted as the intermediary, they might have remained silent until the end. And so, this time which seemed like penance for Harold continued for more than an hour.

By the time they had finished dinner, Harold's mental exhaustion had reached its peak. After finishing dinner, with somewhat unreliable footsteps, Harold returned to his own room. Erika saw that back off while feeling apologetic.

Although she wanted to scold Itsuki, maybe because he had sensed it, he had left with Harold and his figure could no longer be seen. She was delighted that due to her brother's plan she was able to be together with Harold after a long time, but more than that her thoughts of being a bother weighed on her. Originally, Erika didn't want to make her existence known during the fighting tournament unless Harold was injured. And now that plan was in this state.

While thinking about giving Itsuki a strict warning the next time when they were alone, Erika also returned to her room. She was staying in the same inn as Harold's and Itsuki's, but since she had taken into consideration of not wanting to cross each other, she was in a different floor.
When she opened the door to her room, Juno greeted Erika with her usual nonchalant air.

「Welcome back, Erika-sama ～. You seem to be tired ～」

「You were watching?」

「Even though it's like this, I'm also your guard ～. Although, since both Itsuki-sama and Harold-sama are stronger than me, I don't know if there's any meaning in acting as your guard ～」

Being strong or weak was irrelevant to the necessity of a guard, but Erika understood what Juno wanted to say. Since those 2 would frequently fight each other, the chances to see it wasn't scarce, but recently the times where she couldn't understand what was going on because they were too fast, had increased.
Especially Harold, who would move so fast that people would be doubtful whether he was teleporting or not. Although, even Itsuki too was abnormal since he could deal with it.

「Come to think of it, have you talked about Colette-sama ～?」

Colette Emerel.
The girl who was supposed to have been killed along with her mother for various circumstances, was for some reason there in Delfit. If thought about it considering the season, then she might have come here to look at the fighting tournament.

「No, I've concealed it」

「As expected, there's no way you can tell him ～」

「Yes, since we shouldn't know that she is alive」

If Harold realized that the Sumeragi knew that Colette and her mother, Clara, were still alive, then they would invite unneeded suspicion from him.
The Emerel mother and daughter were protected by him even to the extent of him being dishonored. Erika absolutely didn't want to disgrace those thoughts. She had no intention to step into that secret until Harold himself revealed it one day.

But still, she couldn't simply not say even a single thing. That's why, Erika said that if they were to meet again, she wished to become friends.

Erika felt it after she actually saw Colette herself. That couldn't she too become a person who could support Harold. Colette should have also known. About the strength and kindness of Harold. Because she had been saved by it, and was still being protected by it.

If they were to meet again, then that might be the time when Harold would speak about the secret. Erika thought that at that time she would once again want to become friends with Colette. They could become good friends for sure.

「I'll go to bed for today. Juno, you too return to your room」

「Understood ～. Good night, Erika-sama」

「Good night」

After Juno left the room, Erika changed into her sleep-wear, and as soon as she turned off the lights of the room, she dived into her bed. It was different from the usual futon, since it gave off an unfamiliar springy sensation.
Compared to the one in the Stokes mansion, it wasn't very comfortable to sleep on.

Since she couldn't properly fall asleep, the thoughts that were there previously and their continuation went through her head.
If she became friends after they met Colette again, then at that time, even Colette might get drawn towards Harold.

Although they were engaged, it was just temporary. She also knew that Harold was planning to cancel it. If that happened, then Colette might become her rival in love.

Normally, one would feel jealous. But strangely, Erika's heart was calm. It wasn't because she thought that she had the advantage in love.

'Colette will become my rival. That too is fine', was how she thought. In these past few years, Erika became aware that she was yearning for Harold. If she were to hope for it, she thought that she wanted her first love to be fulfilled.

But for Erika, those feelings of love weren't the most important. What she wished for more than anything else was for Harold's happiness. That's why she wanted for Harold to be with the person he himself would choose. It didn't matter even if that person wasn't her.

If her feelings were rejected, then she would cry for sure. Her love towards Harold was real.

But still, if Harold were to marry Colette or someone else, she wanted to bless them from the bottom of her heart with a bright smile. Even these were Erika's true feelings.
It wasn't as though there were no other ways to support Harold other than becoming his partner.

(That's why, I'm looking forward to our reunion)

While being bathed in the moonlight coming from the window, she gently smiled towards her future friend.
The brilliantly shining moonlight reminded her of Colette's vibrant blond hair.
While thinking about that, Erika closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

TL-
1. The kanji used is (鉱石) – kouseki.
2.The kanji used is (結晶) – kesshou.

Episode 25

「Fuwa ～a, why do we have do something like patrolling at a time like this?」

Wearing an armor which was carved with the emblem that represented the Saint King’s chivalric order, black wings similar to obsidian and a silver sword, a man in the latter half of his twenties muttered listlessly while yawning hugely. His subordinate, who was following behind him, chided him seeing as he clearly had no enthusiasm at all.

「Since it is work, please don’t complain, Squad leader. Even I don’t want to patrol so early in the morning」

The clock’s needle was currently pointing at a bit past 5 A.M. Moreover, the patrol had started together with sunrise, at 4 in the morning.
The reason was because of the already open and bustling shops. Especially flourishing were shops that served alcohol.

Once in a year, during the 3 days when the fighting tournament was held, almost all the fishermen would take a break from work, and they would drink alcohol from morning to get excited for the tournament and would let the merry-making unfold.
The town would overflow with drunk people, so there were repeated quarrels and the public order would get a little bad. The patrol would act as both a deterrence force and also to deal with cases like those.

「I think that you can’t be too merry just because there’s a festival」

「Although you’re saying that, why are you trying to go drink alcohol?」

The subordinate grabbed the shoulder of his superior, Squad leader Cody, who was trying to enter a bar as though it was very natural.
Him being this informal in his speech and attitude towards his superior was solely because of Cody’s personality. It wasn’t that he didn’t give Cody any respect.

「Ale is calling me」

「Don’t suddenly say idiotic things with a serious face」

Cody's subordinate brought him back to the patrolling course as though he was dragging him.
Without being able to do anything, Cody just saw off the bar which was becoming distant. It wasn't clear as to whose position was higher.

「Haa………so, not being able to do anything other than look at the surrounding people drink alcohol will continue for another 3 days, huh…………」

「Even though you say that, Squad leader, aren't you weak against alcohol?」

'Moreover, it's irritating that you get entangled in a quarrel after you drink', towards the subordinate who added such a complaint, Cody replied.

「It's not that I like drinking alcohol. I like getting drunk」

For Cody, drinking ale was a means and not the objective. He declared that anything was fine as long as he got inebriated.
Accompanying Cody to drink some cheap, unappetizing alcohol, and finally getting dragged into a quarrel, for him, it was unbearable.

While the 2 of them were engaged in such a worthless dialog, from the alley in front of them, they suddenly heard a sound as though glass was shattering. Consequently, they also heard a woman's shriek and a loud noise.
They exchanged glances, and then, both of them sighed deeply.

「Looks like it's time for work」

「Good grief……….Can't they drink in a more enjoyable manner」

「That's not something that Squad leader can say」

「Shut up. Well, Robin-kun, let's go control the situation with that frightening face of yours that makes everybody scared without any exceptions」

While speaking, they ran towards the direction of the sound. Turning around the corner of the alley, they pushed through the crowd of people to confirm what was happening. He ignored Robin aka Robinson who was muttering,'Can't you change the way you say it…………', behind him.

「Alright, please excuse me」

「Haah? Don't push through-!?」

The robust man who lived on the seas, turned around to complain towards Cody, who was forcing his way through, and after looking behind him he saw Robinson's face and lost his voice.
A 190 cm tall figure with a muscular physique, with dark skin more tanned than fishermen's. Those dark grey sanpaku[1] eyes coupled with them being slanted, his fiendish face looked as though he was intimidating the other party.
He was much more scary than those monsters around here.

Robinson's temperament was gentle. He was the so-called type of person who was at a disadvantage due to his appearance.
But the amount of times it was used as an advantage when he was working as a knight wasn't scarce. If the enemy was weak-willed, they would become timid as soon as they were glared at, and in situations like these, his path would naturally open up.
Even this time, the effect was instantaneous. It was to the extent that as soon as they noticed Robinson's presence, the crowd parted.

「Truly, it's so smooth when Robin-kun is here」

「I'll accept that as praise……….」

Like this, after Cody and Robinson struggled and arrived at the center of the crowd, there was a single boy and an adult man, and also a person who was wriggling while flapping his legs while his torso was thrust into a big water jug in front of a store.
Even while Cody and Robinson still couldn't grasp what was happening, the boy pulled out the man who was stuck in the water jug. While looking down on the soaked man, who was and coughing and choking while on all fours, the boy muttered sarcastically.

「How's it? Have you sobered up a little?」

The man who was frantically inhaling air had no leeway to answer. Instead, the other man flared up at the boy.

「You bastard, what the hell are you doing!」

「Can't you tell just by looking? It seems as though even you have no recollection of what you did, so how about you too pour cold water on yourself like this bastard? Well, if you weren't sane from before itself, then it would have no meaning though」

「Spouting out shit as you please……..! I won't show mercy even if you're a kid!」

Maybe because he was too drunk, the man approached the boy in a run while brandishing his right arm, wanting to hit the boy.
Even though he knew he couldn't make it in time, Cody ran after the man to stop him. And he saw those eyes.
The boy's penetratingly cold pupils.

Even with a man who wanted to hurt him right in front of his eyes, let alone showing hostility, the boy didn't even seem to be interested in him. And not only that, he even captured Cody, who was rapidly approaching from behind the man, in his vision.
In this situation, he had a calmness and a broadness of vision unthinkable of a child.

His eyes met with the boy's. In that instant, those emotionless eyes were dyed by a look of surprise, and then by vigilance.
But that too was only momentary. The boy slipped past the man's large swing and drove his elbow into the man's solar plexus.

That was more than enough to make the man kneel. The boy, who appeared from the other side of the man who had crumbled down, still had his sight turned towards Cody, severely glaring at him, even while being showered in the surrounding crowd's applause.
Being in the middle of this series of events, Cody hit upon something.

(Don't tell me, he perceived my strength? Just by the intersection of our sight that didn't even fully last for even an instant?)

The unmotivated attitude, dislike towards fetters of obligation and hiding of true strength had affected Cody and had made him be content with the status of having the official post of Squad leader, but his fighting prowess was such that even in the chivalric order, it would be much faster if one counted from the top to reach him. It was to the that extent that he could fight on par with the person who would most likely become the next Captain of the Saint King's chivalric

order, Vincent Van Westerfort.
If it was that the boy became surprised at his strength and went on guard looking out for his intervention, then Cody could understand the boy’s reaction.

(Even more than his strength being able to defeat a large man in one blow, the surprising matter is his observant eyes)

To be able to accurately see through whether the opponent’s strength was higher or lower than oneself’s just by looking, the person himself should have a certain degree of ability. It seemed as though the boy was considerably strong. Wanting to relax the boy’s vigilance, who was still observing him very closely, Cody raised both his hands and plastered a tired smile on his face.

「Well, that was splendidly skillful. Onii-san was surprised」

That figure of him laughing,’Ha ha ha’, was extraordinarily shady. But maybe because the boy decided that he didn’t want to mix up matters with Cody, he slackened his vigilance. Thinking that it would be fine to ask him about the situation if it was like this, Cody continued to speak.

「I’m sorry, but could you please tell me what exactly happened? Even we just came running now, so we still haven’t grasped the situation」

「……….It was just that these drunkards were quarreling. And during that time, one of them was thrust towards me so I just dealt with him」

「I see. That was quite the artistic way of dealing with it. Joking aside」

Remembering the legs sprouting out from the water jug, his laughter was welling up. Later on, it might become a funny story when he was drinking. The boy tried to leave since there was nothing else left to speak.

「Ah, wait, wait! You aren’t injured, are you? Even if it’s a scratch, if germs enter it’ll be terrible」

「I just dealt with guys who couldn’t even help me warm-up. There’s no problem」

「Really? Don’t take it lightly. If you just move your body for a bit, then any pain might……….」

「Annoying. If you want to know about what happened, ask the rubbernecks.

Or else, do you want to waste my time by questioning me?」

「Ah, you found out?」

His true feelings was that about 20% was for grasping the situation. The rest of it was because he was curious about the boy's identity, he wanted to drag the conversation but it ended futilely. Glancing at Cody who had easily confessed, the boy left.

「Squad leader, what to do with those people?」

「Ah, right, let's see. For now, we'll wait for them to recover, and in the meantime……….」

While firing orders to Robinson, Cody was thinking about the black-haired boy. That discernment and the way he carried himself, and also that unflinching grit even with a person as strong as Cody in front of him, all these were abilities that couldn't be learnt if he hadn't experienced real combat. As he saw it, the boy was about 12 to 13 years old, but it was unknown as to where he had piled up such experiences.

(There are many points that I'm curious about, but to start with, let's pay attention to the fighting tournament. It seems as though I'll be able to see something interesting)

From his words that said they weren't even able to warm him up, the probability of him participating in today's fighting tournament was high. When he thought of how the fight for the under-13 division was being held on the 1st day, the boy's age too seemed to be dead on.
To the work that was boring, a fragment of enjoyment came rolling in. While thinking of remembering the boy's name, Cody just realized that he had forgotten to ask for the boy's name.

◇

(I panicked! I seriously panicked! Why is Cody here!?)

As though running away from the crowd of people, or rather after actually running away, Harold entered an empty alley and held his head.
The reason was because of the one he had just now encountered, Cody. It was obvious since Harold knew his name, but as expected he too was a character

who appeared in the game.

He was the core person of the mercenary group『Furiel』, which was made up of wanderers………but he would occasionally appear in front of the hero party and from a common front, and at times would use them in a good way-he was that kind of incomprehensible character. Well, basically he was a good person who came out in some spots and had the role of rescuing the party.
Harold already knew about the setting of Cody being a former member of the Saint King's chivalric order, so he wasn't surprised seeing him wear that armor, but he hadn't even thought that he would run into Cody in this place.

Because of the tumult of the city that started stirring at sunrise, Harold had opened his eyes when the time was bit past 4 in the morning.
While thinking about the boisterous and somewhat restless air, he was reminded of the college festival in his university years, and as though it was inviting him his legs turned towards the city.

30 minutes after he thought of doing some warm-up while also exploring Delfit, a loud shout reached Harold's ears when he was wandering in the market street without any aim. When he turned his eyes towards the origin of the voice, there were 2 men who were grasping each other's collars and quarreling. Due to their scuffle, a wooden table was overturned and the plates and glasses on top of it fell down and shattered with a piercing noise.
As he thought of how they were overflowing with vigor so early in the morning, and when was about to pass them since he wasn't meddlesome enough to stop them, that happened.

The man who was thrust away came falling in Harold's direction. It wasn't a big deal. It would have been fine to quickly avoid him and walk away. When he was about to do so, he realized that there was a small girl behind him. If Harold were to dodge, the girl might be squashed by the man.

And from there, his body moved before he could think. Harold swept the legs of the man, who was unbalanced and was falling down towards him, while at the same time he gripped the man's right wrist and shoved him inside the uncovered water jug. The man who was floating in midair had no means to struggle.
After that, it became something like Harold fighting the other man and paying him back after agitating him with sarcastic words. At this point, Harold had a

defiant mental state thinking,'I don't care anymore'.
He had already given up being hateful at this mouth whenever it spit out reckless remarks since it would just make him tired.

When Harold was thinking of handling it as fast as possible, he noticed the suddenly incoming Cody and his mind went into chaos.
Due to that, he lost his composure and unintentionally erred in holding back as he used his elbow.

(Sorry, I went too far, uncle who's name I don't know)

Remembering the appearance of the man who had fainted, Harold apologized in his heart, and after suddenly calming down, he realized that there had been no need to run away from Cody.
In the first place, Harold and Cody's relationship in the game hadn't been described. By the time the game started, Harold had been a member of the chivalric order, and Cody had already made Furiel. Although there might have been some period when they had both been members, it would have been very short.

(I mean, wouldn't it have become more easier later if he had remembered my face?)

Since there were times when Cody would accompany the hero party, if Harold had some connection to him, Cody could become a source for Harold to learn about the party's internal affairs. If he thought about it, then his previous actions might have been too hasty.
While pondering about how to somehow build a friendly relationship with Cody the next time they met, Harold returned to the inn to have breakfast.
When he arrived in front of the inn, he met Itsuki who had just come out.

「Good morning, Harold-kun. Where had you gone?」

「Previewing the venue」

It was true that along with taking a stroll, he had taken a glance at the venue. Looking at the unexpectedly big stage, honestly he was a bit nervous.

「It seems like you have enough motivation. I have something that I want to give you」

「……….What is this?」

Itsuki handed him something that was wrapped in paper. While feeling suspicious, he peeled the wrapping off. The thing that was there was a mask that covered from above the nose, like the one used in balls.

「Since you're participating while changing your name, I thought how about even hiding your real face too」

「Like hell I'd want this!」

That retort came from his very soul. They might have been the most powerfully said words from the time he had possessed this body. Somehow recently Itsuki's character had become more and more incomprehensible. When they had first met, Harold had thought that he was a person with serious sister complex, but actually, he had a weird playfulness which could be considered as quite similar to Erika in the game.
But when he prepared for such an item with a serious face, Harold couldn't help but doubt whether he was playful or a natural airhead. Was he really the same person who had outwitted Erika and Harold last night?

Harold, who was dejected with the mask given as a present, would immediately come to know that he had been registered in the tournament with an extremely dubious name like『Mr.Lord』, and would once again quarrel with Itsuki just before the tournament.
As a result, his nervousness was dispersed with a pointless tiredness replacing it, and he stood on the stage for his first match.

The stage at the venue was surrounded with a huge crowd with their enthusiastic gazes and cheers directed towards the participants. The pressure felt as though it could physically push. If one took even a step out of the room where the under-13 division's participants were present, they would unsparingly be bathed in that pressure.

「And facing off, with his real name unknown, is Mr.Lord-kun!」

When his registered name was called, Harold climbed up the stage with heavy footsteps. Although this digressed, the only one who had used an alias from among all the participants was just Harold, so he stood out even more. Even if he didn't want his background to be known, if he gathered attention due to it, then wouldn’t it have had an adverse affect.

While thinking about such things, Harold pushed down his embarrassment, and as though expelling all his emotions, his face became completely expressionless. Although that appearance seemed as though he was concentrating on the match, if one looked at the young boy from up close, they would feel as though they were looking at some fearful existence.

And when the match was about to start, Harold saw her. The blond hair that was shining due to the sunlight was longer than what he remembered, with it being tied in a ponytail now, was the girl he had saved 3 years ago. Although she still had childish features, there were vestiges of features that would be there 5 years later of which only Harold knew, Colette Emerel was there in the spectator seats.
Colette too looked at Harold with her chestnut colored eyes. As though to run away from that gaze, Harold averted his eyes.

She completely knew. When he saw how Colette had widened her eyes due to surprise, Harold was convinced of it. It was the worst timing possible for a reunion since Erika was here. If there was a God, he wanted to curse at his nastiness.

(Ah, if I knew that it would be like this, it would have been better to have worn that mask given by Itsuki…….. It might have become unexpectedly popular. Isn’t it the strongest item since it can hide one’s identity while also get laughs?)

Harold, who had fallen into a crisis, for now, attempted to escape reality.

TL-
1.Sanpaku gan (三白眼) or Sanpaku (三白) is a Japanese term meaning “three whites”, and refers to eyes in which the white space above or below the iris is visible.

Episode 26

While being jostled by the heated-up crowd, he pushed his way through and moved forward. While apologizing to the surrounding crowd, with light movements he quickly arrived at the front row of the spectator seats.

「Oh, it seems like I somehow made it in time. It was worth it to leave the work to my subordinates」

Stroking the stubble on his chin, Cody muttered after he found that black-haired boy standing on the stage. Cody's squad had been ordered to patrol all around the city. He had pushed that work onto his 3 subordinates including Robinson, and had sneaked out to observe the fighting tournament. Right about now, his subordinates would be working while resentfully complaining about him. He would receive scoldings after they met later, but for now he forgot about that and gave preference to satisfying his curiosity.

Sitting in a seat which had a good view, he watched a few matches that weren't very interesting. Finally, the boy whom he had been waiting for, appeared on the stage. His outfit seemed like it was tailor-made for him with the material being good quality leather. Even the gauntlet equipped on his left arm, from its color, it seemed to be made from materials different from the general bronze ones.

(That's superior than the ones used by the low-class knights(us). Is he a noble from somewhere?)

Even the name that was called was Mr.Lord, which was obviously an alias. From his outfit, the probability of him being a common citizen was low. In that case, it would be quite hard to lure him into the chivalric order. Actually recruiting him would completely depend on his strength, so Cody had come here to ascertain that.

In other words, this would work as a splendid pretense of him scouting out a talent who could carry the chivalric order in the future. By no means was he slacking off. He had also prepared to argue with such sophistry when the time came. With this, he could concentrate on the boy's match without any anxiety.

「Then let’s see what you’ve………got?」

But before Cody could finish his sentence, the match was over. Immediately after the ‘Start!’ call, Lord closed the distance between himself and his opponent in a single step, flicked away his opponent’s sword and thrust his own sword tip before the opponent.
The match hadn’t even taken 3 seconds, being concluded at lightning speed. It was understandable that the opponent boy’s eyes had become dots.

And yet, coupled with that sharp gaze which seemed as though he wanted to kill, it might have induced much more fear than the fake sword thrust in front of the boy. Swallowed by the murderous aura of Lord, the opponent boy declared his surrender in a quavering voice.

Due to the match ending instantaneously, even the crowd which was excited, didn’t know what had happened and was making a stir. Without even minding the surrounding crowd’s bewilderment, Lord left the stage.

「………Oioi, isn’t this real outstanding talent?」

The strength of the participants in this sort of tournament would be in all ranges. Even the current opponent boy had sufficient strength, but it was only to the degree of when speaking within that given age group. In other words, it wasn’t the part about him winning that needed to be noted. His speed was what was astonishing. Most probably, the other boy might have felt something like before he realized, he had lost. If he just compared only with regards to speed, then Lord would completely outclass his current subordinates.

Even while being surrounded by a few thousand spectators, without faltering even by a little, he had overwhelmed his opponent with movements that had no hesitation or useless parts. Although he was still immature with regards to mind, skill and body, being able to exhibit that much physical ability under such a situation was splendid.
This much talent, it would be wasteful to keep it hidden. Thinking like that may be due to the ego of belonging to the chivalric order, but as far as Cody was concerned, they would lose nothing by increasing the amount of excellent people. Even if he called it scouting, the right to decided whether a person would join or not was left to themselves, but Cody didn’t have such an admirable

personality so as to hold back due to this.

(It seems like it would be good to call dibs on him. But……..)

From the previous match, Cody perceived a certain indication from Lord. It was as though he was rushing the match, a negligible but sure impatience was present.
It was that Lord who had seen through Cody's strength with not even an instant passing when their gazes had intersected this morning. There was no way he could not have perceived the difference in strength between himself and his opponent. Obviously, it wouldn't even become a reason to rush for the win. It might have just been simply Cody misunderstanding.

But if that wasn't the case, then towards what was he showing that impatience. This doubt remained within Cody's head.

◇

When he noticed Colette, Harold's actions were extremely fast. Along with the call for the start of the match, he broke into a quick attack, made his opponent surrender instantly and left the stage.
He hurriedly returned to the tournament participants' room and while frantically moving his eyes, he started searching for a certain boy.

Since Colette was here, the probability of him too being here was high. The protagonist of『Brave Hearts』, Ryner.
The problem was whether he was a spectator like Colette or a participant in the tournament. The worst case would be when he would have to fight Ryner in this tournament.

Unfortunately, Harold's prayer,'Please be in the spectator seats', vanished into thin air. That embodiment of naturally highly-spirited and liveliness, his spiky hair entered Harold's vision. His hair color was as he remembered, a burning red.
When the name Ryner Griffith was called, he dashed towards the stage with a state of having excessive fighting spirit. Harold's head hung down after he confirmed that figure. With this, it became definite that Ryner was participating in the tournament.

(Seriously ～……….? Should I give up before I face him?)

This development shouldn’t have been there in the game. In the game, when he reaches Delfit, there was a scene where Ryner would be surprised looking at a huge ship. ‘So it was the first time he had come to Delfit’, such words were said. He completely didn’t understand how that would lead to him participating in the fighting tournament.

In any case, he would let sleeping dogs lie[1]. While he was thinking of withdrawing from the tournament by giving some vague reason, he suddenly realized that what he was doing now was the same as what he had done this morning. Without even thinking deeply, just because they were characters that appeared in the game, he was reflexively trying to avoid them.
If he thought back to it, the reason Ryner was hostile towards Harold was mainly because of Clara being killed and Harold’s speech and behavior within the story. And Harold had already cleared Clara’s matter.

Although his speech was like that, even in the future, he had the intention to act decently like how he had done until now. This meant that there would be no reason for Ryner to hate him. Instead, it would be a good plan to get along with him. Although he had no intention to be included in the hero party that was always at the front lines with the highest danger, it was possible to give them advise on increasing their war potential by using his knowledge about the game. If they became hostile, there was no way that they would even listen to him.

When he thought until there, his head had also cooled down a lot. In the first place, even if Erika and Colette met, it would be their first time seeing each other. As long as Harold wasn’t present when they met, there was no way his past actions would be discovered.
Since Erika wouldn’t get close to Harold on her own, it would be a good chance to indirectly inquire about Colette and Ryner’s relationship through this tournament.

While confirming Ryner’s strength at the present point of time, if Harold could get acquainted with him for the future, he could also build a friendly relationship. There was no need to simply stand and watch this chance slip away from right under his nose. As he established his objective, Harold shifted his awareness towards the match. When he turned towards the stage, it was just when Ryner had won the match. He was happily making a Guts-pose.

Although it was hypothetical, he was still the Hero that would save the world in the future. 'If talking with regards to the game, even if he was level 1, he wouldn't lose in this kind of place', was what Harold wanted to think. That said, for now he should frankly congratulate him. It would also help him start a conversation.

(What should I say? Congrats……..would become "Well, aren't you impulsive". What is that? That's so arrogant. Uh.., to make it harmless and inoffensive……….)

While he was thinking of such things, Ryner had already come near him. Wanting to stop him, Harold spontaneously said these words.

「Oi, you, Red hair」

As a result, he made a mistake in choosing his words. Together with his posture, where he had folded his arms while leaning his back on the wall, his words came off as being extraordinarily haughty. But once the words left his mouth, there was no way they would return. At the words 'Red hair', Ryner's feet stopped.

「Ah, you!」

As soon as Ryner, who was stopped, became aware of Harold, he suddenly drew closer. When Harold thought that he might have gotten angry, there was no anger in those eyes, but for some reason they were blazing with a fire.

「Say, aren't you that incredibly fast guy? I was watching, but I didn't understand at all! How did you do that? Can I also do that!?」

That manner of his contained so much force that it made even Harold, who had called him, want to back away. Even in the game, he was a character who had retained his childishness, but when he was actually a kid, it was all the more powerful.

「Even if it's just a little trick for it, please teach me! If that's not possible, it's fine even if you just tell what kind of practice you do regularly! Even I carry weights and run around, but I can't move as fast as you」

「To start with, close that needlessly functioning mouth」

「Ah, sorry. Come to think, I still haven't introduced myself. I'm Ryner!」

Ryner cheerfully extended his right hand.
After hesitating for a moment, Harold shook that hand.

「………..Harold. Call me however you want」

「Okay! Yoroshiku[2], Harold!」

Ryner turned a worry-free grin towards Harold. For him, they were already friends. Ryner was a boy like that. Even for Harold, that was a likeable point. Contacting this pure boy completely due to ulterior motives hurt Harold's conscience a bit, but he ignored it.

「I saw your fighting style but you were somewhat impulsive. Although, you're much better than these other riffraff」

「Hee, thank you」

No matter what, one could only think that he was trying to agitate the other participants. Obviously, grim glares flew towards them from the surrounding people, but without noticing them, Ryner frankly became shy. It seemed as though him being an idiot who couldn't understand sarcasm hadn't changed. For Harold, where the forcibly used abusive language was a cause of constant annoyance, truthfully he was considerably grateful for that kind of reaction.

「But I have no duty to expressly teach you anything. If you want to know, then fight against me and try to steal it. Only if you're able to keep winning up through the tournament though」

「I'll do it! Harold too, don't lose before you fight against me, alright?」

「Who do you think you're speaking to. The only thing you'll be able to learn is that the difference in strength between us is as huge as the difference between heaven and earth」

「I'm looking forward to it. Well, later! Next time, let's meet during the match!」

Ryner, with that friendly smile until now disappearing, instead smiling belligerently and Harold, who was as haughty as usual. Determined and fearless. For now, this was the preliminary encounter.

From afar, the other participants were glowering at those 2 who were like

that. Since both of them spoke as though they didn’t care about anybody else than the one in front of themselves, it couldn’t be helped that the others thought that those 2 were provoking them.
Unexpectedly, he had raised the hurdle for Ryner, but if he was hero, then he could easily jump over them all.

「Only then will this fight be worth it」

Harold mumbled while looking at his right hand, which had been grasped strongly.

TL-
1. The saying used here is actually -sawaranu kami ni tatari nashi – which translates to -If you don’t touch a god, you won’t be cursed.
2.This is like the most common annoying to translate word. Although it could be translated to ‘Please take care of me’, that becomes too polite coming from Ryner. So I left it as it is. If anybody has any suggestions, please do tell.

Episode 27

Those emotions that hinted at his true feelings, for them to be expressed as words was a difficult feeling. The most appropriate might be the feeling of being deeply moved.
Finally, he had already come to the point where he met with the hero of『Brave Hearts』, Ryner. The chance meeting that should have happened 5 years in the future according to the game, had already been accomplished.
Although it was completely outside his expectations, being able to build a friendly relationship with Ryner had proved that his actions up until now hadn't been wrong.

Involuntarily, the corners of his mouth rose up. It looked like an extremely evil smile. The participants who personally saw it were attacked by chills, and all of them simultaneously retreated. Harold, whose conscious had completely shifted onto Ryner, didn't notice the situation around him.

How can I gain his trust? How high is his strength currently? Does he have a close relationship with Colette like in the game?- Harold only had these thoughts inside his head right now.

As a matter of fact, soon after Harold came to know that this was the world of『Brave Hearts』, while establishing the objective of evading his own death flags, only once he had thought that there might not be any need for him to personally take any action.
Bluntly speaking, this world was something that was produced. It was an interweaving of characters and fate determined by the producers, a story with its conclusion already determined.

There will always be a protagonist in a story. And for a protagonist, something called protagonist correction[1] always exists.

That, which could also be called as the will of the author, was a tremendous power that could make the surrounding circumstances, the flow of the environment, the world itself an ally of the protagonist. Naturally, inside the game, even Ryner had been saved by it. If that wasn't the case, no matter how outstanding they were, there was no way the world could be saved by some 10 odd people.

But contrarily, as long as Ryner was the protagonist, people would, the world would ally with him. This world too should have surely been made in that manner.
That's why, he doubted the necessity of a small existence like Harold Stokes trying out to help. Without doing anything unnecessary, quickly getting out of the front stage of the story, it would be be much better and would also be as far away as possible from danger if he became some nameless Villager A.
Like that itself, wouldn't it be fine to just play dumb in some corner of the world like the minor role he was and wait for the story to welcome the happy ending.

If he thought back to it now, that might have been him shrinking back due to his future, wanting to throw away his duties and escaping. But still, the reason he wasn't invited by that easy way out was because of the fact that he had saved Clara.
Although it was with Harold's assistance, she was able to escape her death which should have already been determined.
In short, even if this was a world that resembled the game 『Brave Hearts』, there was no correction power that existed like in the story.

If this hypothesis was correct, then even if Harold ran away, there might not be any villain who would appear instead of him. That would make the story collapse. It might also serve as a negative effect on the protagonist's growth. The protagonist who couldn't grow as much as in the game couldn't save the world- to also avoid this kind of situation, Harold continued to be involved in the story.

(…….But if you think about it in the other way, it would also be possible to strengthen Ryner)

Although Harold had just focused on the negative aspects and hadn't even thought about it until they actually met, by making him accumulate more experience than in the game and by teaching him how to efficiently fight against enemies, Ryner could become stronger than in the game.

Hiding this secret motive, Harold was waiting for their confrontation. Until the fight against Ryner, all the other participants he fought with, were defeated in a

single move without any exceptions.
And the battle against Ryner was, as though someone had planned for it, was on the stage for the finals. Both their victories were overwhelming. Almost none of their opponents could exchange blows with them. And when the 2 of them stood against each other on the stage, the spectators' excitement had reached the peak.

「Like I promised, I've come till here」

「Naturally. If it isn't just all talk, then prove that strength to me」

「Bring it on!」

Making a strong face filled with competitive spirit, without being timid, Ryner declared. His thoughts that he was absolutely going to win were clearly floating up. Maybe he couldn't hold back those feelings. As soon as the match started, Ryner attacked.

It was a horizontal sweep, as though wanting to ward off the opponent. Immediately after Harold avoided that by moving backwards, Ryner, who had closed the distance, pursued attacking. From the right, from the left, from above, from below, and sometimes, directly from the front. Those uninterrupted sword strikes that were unleashed, each and every single one of them, were calmly knocked away by Harold.

Speed, power and technique. Certainly, compared to the opponents Harold had fought against until now, Ryner outclassed every single one of them in all these areas. Harold could understand how he could safely come up to the finals. But that was it. He didn't feel any menace from Ryner's strength.

(Oioi……..seriously, is that all?)

As far as Harold was concerned, bluntly speaking, there wasn't much difference compared to the other participants. At the current point of time, if Ryner's strength was expressed in game values, it would be level 1, and if one took his age into consideration, then he might be even lower. If that point was taken as the basis, then it would be inevitable to think that Harold was aiming too high, but if it was like this, then Harold couldn't help but doubt whether he could become a hero who could truly save the world.
Personally seeing Ryner's strength, the thing Harold felt was neither anger nor

disappointment. It was an anxiety that seemed to weigh down heavily upon him.

◇

That was, for Ryner, a shocking spectacle. The tournament he had participated in, while in high spirits. The boy who had participated before him, with a speed that could only be seen as though he had disappeared, had finished his match before anybody could even blink.

Harold. That was how the boy, who was so fast that even following him with the eyes would be difficult, named himself. Moreover, Harold who had that much strength, had acknowledged his own strength. For Ryner who had put great effort to become strong, to gain strength for protecting the people important to him, those words made him happy. But at the same time, seeing that a boy, whose age wasn't that much different than his own was so strong, he also felt frustrated.

That's why, he was really serious. Like how he was against his parents, who repelled him every time he challenged them, or even more seriously putting his all his feelings, Ryner confronted Harold.
As though he wanted to collide with Harold with everything he had.
And yet, Ryner's sword didn't reach Harold.

(Not even a single strike is hitting him, why!?)

More than 50 sword strikes. Almost all of them were repelled by Harold's sword, and those that weren't, were easily evaded by him by simply turning his body.
Although it was a thin and lightweight longsword, he was freely using it with only one hand, and was effortlessly dealing with Ryner's strikes.

And moreover, Harold still hadn't used that extremely high speed of his to attack in this match. He was continuing to let Ryner attack as he pleased while not moving his legs at all.
As though he was completely on the defensive. Because it was different from his usual flashy way of fighting, the spectators were cheering him on by saying,'Fight properly'.
But for Ryner who was crossing swords with him, every time they he struck with his sword, he was shown the clear difference in their strength. It was close to the

despair felt when a staunch fort, furnished with tall, thick ramparts, was invaded with just a single swing of a sword.

The moment a small crack was produced in Ryner's heart, his sword dulled by a little bit, and seeing that, Harold backed away.
And he threw these words at Ryner's strength.

「What a disappointment. You're not even worth considering」

「What!?」

「Isn't that the truth? You're attacks aren't even grazing me. It's futile no matter how many times you repeat it」

「You haven't even attacked yet!」

「You moron. Something like that, I can do it whenever I want」

Harold put those words into action. Simultaneously as Ryner realized that Harold had disappeared from his vision, the sword held by both his hands was cut down.
The blade was split right at the middle, and the upper half of the blade slid on top of the stone floor. There was only the less than one half of the length of the thing that had been a sword, left in his hands.

All the weapons used in the fighting tournament were fake swords that had their edges dulled. That said, to bisect it so cleanly, he couldn't even imagine just how much skill was required.
And yet, the most surprising thing was still that speed. Looking at it from outside and actually confronting it was completely different. Before Ryner could really see anything at all, he had already closed the gap.

「Not being able to even react to something of this level, I can't help but feel shocked」

「Shit…….」

この程度にも反応できないとは呆れるしかないな
ライナー・グリフィス
後に「Brave Hearts」の主人公となる少年。12歳。考えるよりもまず行動の直情型で、後腐れのない真っ直ぐな性格。負けん気が強く、人一倍、強くなりたいという思いが強い。
コレット・アレメール
「Brave Hearts」のヒロインの一人。12歳。天涯孤独の身となるはずだったが、ハロルドによって救われ、母とフローシュ村に移り住み、ライナーの幼馴染みとなる。
ハロルド・ストークス
日本の大学生が憑依した、ゲーム「Brave Hearts」の悪役キャラ。13歳。喋ったことが自動的に傲岸不遜な口調に変換されてしまう。ゲームの知識を駆使し、自身の死亡フラグと世界の滅亡を避けるために奔走する。
エリカ・スメラギ
後にライナーの仲間となる。「Brave Hearts」のヒロインの一人。13歳。名門貴族スメラギ家の長女で、ハロルドの婚約者。魔法、特に回復魔法に才がある。ハロルドを毛嫌いしていたが、彼の真意に気付き……。
DEAD END

He lost, without any suspense. He was shown a difference that was greater than one between an adult and a child. It was the first time since he had been born that he had lost to a person in the same generation in sword strength. He hadn’t even thought that it would be so frustrating.
As though averting his eyes from Harold, who seemed like too distant an existence, Ryner turned his face downwards.

‘Now, it’ll be over after the referee declares my defeat’, thought Ryner, but no matter how much time passed, the referee didn’t raise his voice. What was displayed in front of Ryner’s eyes, when he raised his face up since he was thinking that it was strange, was Harold’s figure who had thrust the fake sword in front of the referee.

「…….Eh?」

Looking at that scene which exceeded his understanding, that frustration and sense of defeat was instantly blown away, and he was left completely dumbfounded.
For some reason, Harold was threatening the referee.

「Oi, you bastard, this guy still hasn’t admitted that he has been defeated, so what are you thinking wanting to end the match?」

「No, well, his weapon is broken and since he can’t fight anymore…….」

「Then won’t it be fine for him to use another one」

「Eeh…..?」

At those words, this time, both Ryner and the referee became perplexed. Ignoring those 2, Harold ripped away a sword from one the other participants below the stage.
No matter how anybody saw it, this match was Harold’s win. Even Ryner, though hadn’t said it from his own mouth, had already acknowledged his defeat.

「Ryner」

「Wh, what?」

Holding a fake sword that had been conveniently taken away, Harold came back in front of Ryner. And then, Harold threw it carelessly at his feet, while he was being vigilant.

「Pick it up if you still have the will to fight」

「………」

Ryner was silently gazing at the thrown sword. If it were the usual him, without any hesitation, he might have picked it up and asked for a rematch. The reason he was hesitating like this now was because Harold was too strong. If there was such a formidable opponent in the same generation, there was no way he could be a match for him. He was afraid of thinking like that, of acknowledging that.

It was close to instinct to think of protecting one’s self-respect, pride. Much less, when Ryner had never lost to anybody except his parents. And now, after he had thoroughly lost to Harold, if he were to fight anymore, then would only add to the shame of losing. His heart might break.
‘That’s why, let’s stop’, he thought.

「For what reason do you seek strength?」

That decision was halted by Harold’s question.

「For what, reason………」

Why had he thought of becoming strong.
Was it because it was his dream to become the Captain of a chivalric order? Was it because he wanted to win against his mother or father some day? Certainly,

those were also true. They were his dream from before, and a nearby target. But he felt that those weren't the correct reasons.

How had he arrived at wanting to fulfill that dream, and that target? Why had he admired the position of the Captain of a chivalric order?

(If I become strong, then I can be a knight. Since if I become a knight, then I can protect various people……..)

Protect. It was a very vague, and yet a very simple desire. But, that was right. Ryner's craving for strength, its origin was laughably simple.

When he had been younger than now, a friend of his had been bullied by a kid who was older than them in the village. The difference of 1 or 2 years was extremely huge for children. To surpass that gap, Ryner sought strength. To protect his friend, to defeat an opponent who was bigger and stronger than himself. The justice that lived inside him, to put that into practice, it wasn't possible if he weren't strong. He wanted strength to protect the things important to him.

「……..I have things that I have to protect. To protect them all, it would be useless if I'm not the strongest!」

There was also the promise he had made with his childhood friend who was always captious. He would never let that person cry again. For the sake of that, he would become stronger than anyone. That's why, no matter how strong the opponent was, Ryner had to win. There was no way he could give up before he could win.

「You'll protect everything? You're acting as though you're a hero」

「Still, that is my resolve」

「Humph, no matter how resolved you are, if you don't have strength corresponding to it, you'd just seem ridiculous」

「If it's power, I'll just increase it! Right here, right now!」

Once again, a fire lit up in Ryner's eyes. The hand that held the sword was hot. That heat, as though wanting to encroach his body, continued spreading from his right hand. His whole body pulsated, with a feeling as though his blood was

boiling.
His body, his heart instantly became lighter.

「Here I come, Harold!」

Strongly kicking the ground, he surrendered his body to that floating sensation and approached Harold with a slash. By completing that series of actions, he understood.
That the him right now was swinging the sword in a sharper and faster manner than he had ever done before. And yet, he could sense that even more power was rapidly gushing forth from inside his body.
He couldn't suppress that delirious sensation. No, the Ryner, who had no intention to suppress it, started to fiercely attack Harold.

When he peeked at Harold's state, although he was repelling the attacks just like before, his expression was distorted by hatred.
The sound of him clicking his tongue informed Ryner that he was pressing Harold back. Due to victory drawing closer, even more power flooded out of him.

「Uryaaaaa!」

He slashed down at Harold with all of his might. Harold barely managed to dodge it. When the sword that cut through the air hit the floor, as though to show his power, a fissure ran through it. Glancing at that, Harold murmured.

「You're using『Brave Mode』here? As expected, you are……..」

「Haa, ha………brave, mode……..?」

He repeated the words he had heard for the first time. And finally, he realized that he was breathing heavily. It didn't look like he could continue being in this state for a long time. Then, he would postpone anything that he needed to think about.

Readjusting his grip on the sword, while raising a voice filled with fighting spirit, he restarted attacking for the nth time.

「Deeeeiii!」

「Don't get conceited!」

This time, Harold responded. A dizzying amount of sword strike were

exchanged. At the battle that couldn't be thought of as being fought by kids, the spectators swallowed their saliva, and the metallic sound of the sword clashes dominated the stadium. Everybody who were present in that place were captivated by their figures, and although they were curious about the outcome of the match, they wanted this battle to last as long as possible. Those contradictory feelings were welling up in them.
But eternity didn't exist. Eventually, the time to end the 2's battle came.

「Gu……….!」

After evading an attack, Ryner's feet got tangled, and when he was about to fall down, he somehow forcefully held his ground. That was because his body that should have been light, abruptly became heavy.
It became so heavy that it was as though the muscles in his hands and legs had been changed into lead, and it was so painful that it was as though even while trying to breath he couldn't inhale air.

(Wrong………I've just returned, to the usual state……….)

Ryner had repeated moving in a way that he himself had thought wasn't usually possible. It was nothing more than the recoil for those actions.
He felt as though he was reaching his limits in even gripping the sword. His legs were trembling just by him standing, and it felt as though he would fall if he lost his focus even for a bit.

He fought well. In the end, he still couldn't properly hit Harold with even a single strike, but still it was a good fight.
If it was the him until yesterday, he couldn't have fought like this until the bitter end. That's why, it would be fine to rest already, right?
Harold is unrivalled.

「………Like, I would say that!!」

The weakness that was creeping up on his heart, Ryner erased it with a loud shout. Even if he couldn't win, even if the other person was unrivalled, he would never give up. This was also for the sake of keeping his promise to Colette.
That high spirit still hadn't gone dim. On the contrary, it increased as though it was burning up all the more.
As though in concord with Ryner, the surrounding winds surged. That red hair

moved like flickering flames.

The next would be the last. And because it was the end, he had to put his all into it. He would fire everything he had got. A single strike with all of his might, all his accumulated effort and all his thoughts placed into it.
If you can–

「Then try to stop iittt!!」

From the sword blade that was swung down as though wanting to cleave Harold, deep crimson flames erupted out with a heavy sound.
Those were flames that contained Ryner's will. His strong emotions that incarnated his thirst for victory.
In all of the 12 years Ryner had been alive for, this was his strongest attack. He had complete conviction that he had fired off something like that.

Those howling flames attacked Harold directly. As though wanting to swallow his body, it was in that instant when those flames conspicuously swelled up.
A white light flashed as though to completely paint over one's vision. Almost simultaneously as everyone closed their eyes due to not being able to bear it, a thunderous sound which seemed to tear the air reverberated throughout the stadium.

One person cowered, while another screamed in fear.
The thing that made all living things forcibly feel terror and peril, it was that dreadful thing's invasion.
The only people who could properly recognize that thing's identity were those who were in a place away from the stadium.

A never before seen huge bolt of lightning attacked the stadium. Suddenly raining down from the sky that was completely clear, that lightning bolt completely crushed the flames that was about to thoroughly burn Harold, without leaving even a trace behind.
Naturally, there was no need to even think about whose doing it was. The only one in the stadium who was completely unwaveringly calm was Harold. He, a boy of only 13 years, had fired that.

「Haha……..seri, ously……?」

Even that one strike into which he had put his everything, until his spirit had been completely exhausted, hadn’t been able to reach Harold. Not only that, he had easily outclassed Ryner. Looking at that scene, he could do nothing other than laugh. But Ryner didn’t have enough energy left to even smile.

With a blurry vision and powerless legs, without being able to move even a single finger, Ryner started falling towards the front.
The one who stopped and supported that body was Harold. Supporting Ryner at his chest area with his right arm, Harold talked as though he was exasperated.

「Idiot. If you could do that, then you should have started off with it」

「Aren’t you being way too harsh……..」

“That” surely indicated his last strike. Being cornered until he could not even properly stand on his own legs, and yet only because he had struggled until the end, wanting to win, that he was able to unleash it.
It wasn’t something that could be used easily.

Ryner, who was astonished at the fact that a person more Spartan than his mother actually existed, could barely reply back in a feeble voice. Maybe due to truly exhausting all his power with that, Ryner lost his consciousness in Harold’s arms. Entrusting him to the medics who came rushing, while watching Ryner being carried away on a stretcher, Harold mumbled a compliment that reached nobody.

「But well, I’ll take back my words saying that you were a disappointment. Since it seems as though your power reaches at least to the level where my feet are」

Although it was thoroughly condescending, it was unmistakably a praise. There was no way Harold’s words could reach Ryner, who had long lost his consciousness. But there seemed to be a somewhat satisfied smile on Ryner’s face.

Author –
While being able to make the game’s protagonist like a protagonist, and at the same time making Harold win, being able to write with that premise is extremely difficult.

TL-

1.In other words, plot armor. There are many definitions for it, but the general one is-The author’s work would depict developments, convenient to the play, that are favorable to the protagonist.

First time seeing plot armor being explained in a novel.

Episode 28

The match between Ryner and Harold concluded. Colette, who was looking at that scene in a daze, came to her senses in the next instant and started running towards Ryner, who had collapsed.
That magic Harold had unleashed at the end. Although it wasn't a direct hit, there was no guarantee that Ryner was safe. Without even listening to Ryner's father, Orbell, trying to restrain her, she moved her legs while being driven by anxiety.

But when she was just a bit away from the first-aid room, her path was blocked by a crowd. Even while thinking,'Why are there so many people?', Colette resolutely plunged into the crowd, and while raising her voice saying, 「Excuse me!」「Please let me through!」, with those thin arms of hers, she pushed her way through them.

That crowd abruptly split. Due to the pressure around her suddenly disappearing, Colette pitched forward due to her momentum, but still, she reorganized her posture with her inherent sense of balance, managing to stop falling down.
And when she raised her face, her eyes met with Harold's.

「Ah…….」

Involuntarily, her voice leaked out.
It seemed as though this crowd had split because they had wanted to avoid Harold. If she were to look around, a space that was close to a circle seemed to be made up around him. Certainly, she could agree that one's knees would become weak if they were to meet him right after they had seen that lightning. Colette too, would have acted similar to them if she hadn't been saved by Harold in the past.

But just because of that, it wasn't as though she could promptly speak to him. There was a huge amount of words and gratitude she wanted to convey. But after seeing the person who had saved her life and her precious childhood friend fight, now, at this particular moment when she was in a very unstable mood, she couldn’t put together any words.

Although it wasn’t as though he had perceived her emotions, Harold started speaking to her.

「Is that the guy whom you have acknowledged?」

「Eh…….? Ah! Y, yes!」

Maybe because Colette’s mind was considerably disturbed, even her reply was very shaky. However, she understood what Harold was speaking about and replied back.

「I thought I had told you to give that to a man who could protect you. Why did you purposely choose a weakling like that?」

‘That’ was most probably the necklace Harold had given her 3 years ago. From the day Ryner had accepted that necklace, he had always worn it around his neck. While in the middle of fighting, Harold must have realized that Ryner was the knight that would protect Colette.

「Ry, Ryner isn’t weak at all. He will protect me」

Colette, who had replied back like that, had done so in a frail voice. However, she hadn’t averted her eyes and had spoken while firmly gazing at Harold.

「Hmph, well if you’re satisfied at just being protected, then that’s fine. A suitable coward for a weakling to protect. At the most, you could only hold Ryner back though」

「Why are you saying something like that……….」

Why Harold was rebuking the both of them, Colette couldn’t understand the reason for doing that. Just, it was unbearably painful to be reproached by Harold.

「You should have personally experienced how helpless being weak is. And yet, if even after that you choose the path of living as a weakling, then suit yourself. Not like I care」

After saying only that much, as though losing his interest in Colette, Harold left. The reunion with the one had who saved her life had just ended with a few lines being exchanged. That too, in a form of one-sidedly being abandoned.

‘Why?’- only that question kept on going around inside her head. Why had Harold, who had saved the both of them, used such harsh words against her? Without understanding the reason, when she came to her senses, there were tears floating up in her vision. It was due to Harold’s irrational behavior, and was also because of the sorrow at being abandoned by him.

She wiped the tears that were about to overflow and fall down with her cuffs. When she turned her eyes towards the direction where Harold left, that back seemed to appear very distant. When she considered that gap as the distance between them, Colette’s heart unnaturally tightened very much.

「……….That’s right, I’ve to go to Ryner」

Powerlessly, Colette instructed herself. As though wanting to run away from something she didn’t want to look at, she dashed towards the direction opposite to Harold. And when she reached the first-aid room, Ryner was lying with his eyes closed. According to the doctor, who was talking to Orbell, who had arrived a bit later, it seemed as though Ryner had only collapsed due to exhaustion and there were almost no external injuries.
The doctor also said that he might wake up soon since healing magic had already been used.

Ryner regained consciousness after about 10 minutes later. While groaning, Ryner opened his eyes.

「Ryner!?」

「Colette……? Uwah!」

As soon as Ryner opened his eyes, Colette embraced him as though covering him. Ryner was confused at the sudden occurrence, but as he started understanding the situation, his face steadily grew redder. The adults in the surroundings, including Orbell, read the mood and left without making any noise. The Colette, into whose eyes those reactions didn’t even enter, strengthened her embrace.

「I’m glad……….」

「What do you………ah, that’s right. I lost」

Realizing that he was made to lie down on a bed, he recalled the match from until just before. Although his whole body was languid, there were no places where he felt pain.

「Are you alright? Does it hurt anywhere?」

「I’m fine. Since Harold held back」

Abruptly hearing Harold’s name coming out from Ryner’s mouth, Colette’s expression became gloomy. Actually, although she didn’t want to behave in this manner, remembering the Harold from just a short while ago, her emotions were thrown into chaos. Ryner peeked at Colette’s face when she was like that.

「Did something happen?」

Ryner’s eyes and voice seemed to indicate his serious concern. From the day they had exchanged that promise, Ryner had always been trying to protect Colette. And because Ryner was like that, Colette trusted him and even if it were Harold, she wouldn’t permit him to look down upon Ryner.

「Say, Ryner」

「Hm?」

「Ryner will protect me, right?」

「Yeah, since I promised!……..well, I ended up losing today though」

Concluding in a poor way, Ryner scratched his head. As though to cheer him up, Colette replied with a laugh.

「Ryner isn’t weak」

「Eh?」

「Although you lost to Harold-sama, you might win the next time」

「Might, huh……..wait, Harold-sama? Does Colette know Harold?」

「Yeah. In the past, he had saved me and mom. The chivalric order’s necklace I gave to Ryner too was given to me by Harold-sama」

「Is that so…….., perhaps, is he a noble?」

「Right」

「As expected. Amazing, that guy. He’s strong, he can use magic, and he’s also a noble」

　‘Amazing’, a very simple impression. But it was actually true, Colette also thought so. What Harold showed in his match against Ryner was the difference in their level of strength.
But Ryner was the strongest among the village children. There had also been a time when he had defeated a ferocious monster alone. Harold had overpowered such a Ryner.

　He was a person who had the strength to fight and also the strength to protect people. That was why, she was thankful for Harold, and also considered him a person worthy of respect. That was how much of a shock she had felt when she had been thrust away.

　「Even so, that guy is way too severe. What do you think he said at the end?『Idiot. If you could do that, then you should have started off with it』」

　While imitating Harold’s tone, Ryner complained. But in that figure there was no anger due to being made fun of nor any sorrow due to losing.
It wasn’t a mistake to say that the flames that Ryner showed with the last strike was the best he could do right now. And it had been splendidly repelled. There was no way Ryner, who hated to lose, wasn’t feeling anything.

　「Aren’t you frustrated?」

　「Frustrated………Isn’t it obvious that I’m frustrated? But more than that……..hmm, how do I say this?」

　Ryner folded his arms and tilted his neck. And after groaning for a while, he spoke out these words.

　「I don’t clearly understand, but it didn’t feel unpleasant. When he told me to do that from the start, it wasn’t like he was making fun of me, but it was somewhat like…….. right, it was like when I get beaten up by mom」

　Ryner’s mother, Leona. Although usually she was a gentle woman, when it came to training Ryner, her mouth would become bad, and her hands would become fast.
But that was for the sake of pushing Ryner towards his dream. It was one of the ways Leona expressed her love towards him. Ryner felt something similar to that

from Harold.
Although you could that it was pitiful for Ryner to feel love when he was beaten up, maybe because it was him, there were some emotions of Harold that he could read.

「Besides, if we fight again some other time, then I'll absolutely win!」

「……..I see. Do your best」

「? Aren't you somewhat dispirited?」

「Not at all」

Pushing own the words that had almost come out of her throat, Colette laughed. Losing in sword fights which he was most proud of, but still being able to look forward like this, Ryner seemed dazzling for the current Colette. She felt as though that light could relieve her cowardice, unbearably she averted her eyes.

「Right, I'll go call back Doctor and Orbell-san! Good grief, even though Ryner is awake, them just disappearing is troublesome」

Leaving behind a dry smile and those words, Colette left the first aid room.

◇

That feeling of excitement he had forgotten a long time ago. Being stimulated by that, with his expression becoming even more looser than his usual flippant one, Cody, without even minding those odd looks he got, dashed through the main street. He wouldn't mind it even if he got caught by his subordinates. More than those trivial things, the matter with the highest priority right now was to get in touch with that black-haired boy.

Lord's ability in the sword and magic were real. Moreover, he had considerably polished them up until now.
And yet, both his skills and his body were still far from being complete. Cody felt that he still had a huge potential for growth.
How ominous. If it was him, then he could eventually equal Vincent, or perhaps, could become a person more remarkable than him.

That was why he was promising, and therefore dangerous. Because he had power different from others, if he were to err in the usage of that power, he might bring enormous harm. Then what should be done. The answer was simple. Toss him inside the den of powerful people.

「And that's why, why don't you try joining the chivalric order (us)?」

「What "And that's why". Has your head cracked?」

After appearing as though he had come cutting through the wind, to the Cody, who had solicited him with neither any greeting nor any preface, Lord hurled harsh words at him without being perturbed in the least.
Although the youth walking together with Lord was vigilant against the extremely suspicious Cody, Lord himself held him back.

「Calm down. This guy, even though he's like this, he's a member of the chivalric order」

「This person………?」

The youth made a dubious face, but that was understandable. For their first meeting, Cody, who gave off a frivolous impression even under normal circumstances, had currently taken off his armor that testified for him being in the chivalric order and was wearing clothes as though he wanted to blend in with the town. Even if he said that he was a member of the chivalric order, it would hard to believe when said so abruptly.

「Ahaha–! Due to certain circumstances, I'm wearing these clothes now, but more or less I am full-fledged member of the chivalric order」

「So, why did you come here?」

「No well, like I said before, how about joining the chivalric order? – a solicitation like that. I think that Lord-kun would do quite well with us」

「……..Let me tell you one thing. My name isn't Lord, it's Harold. Never again call me by that name」

「Hmm?」

「You hate it so much? This name」

「To the degree that I would like to involuntarily crush you」

「It seems as though the circumstances are somewhat complex. Including such matters, want to talk for a bit?」

With his thumb, Cody pointed towards a store behind him. In the Delfit, where there were an innumerable amount of bars, it was one of the few stores that handled drinks other than alcohol.
Towards that invitation, without being able to particularly complain, Harold agreed. The interior of the store was much quieter when compared to the tumult on the streets. Although there were no more than about 30 seats including the ones at the counter, an eighth of them were filled, so it seemed to be flourishing in its own way. At the only place where 3 people could sit, Cody sat down in one of the seats around the circular table and without any hesitation, Harold took the seat directly opposite him.

In contrast to those 2, the youth who sat in between them, maybe due to still being vigilant, frequently kept glancing at Cody even after each of them lightly introduced themselves. Even when Harold was talking about his background and about the details of how he came to participate in the tournament, he wasn't making a good face. But still, it seemed as though he had no intention to stop whatever Harold was choosing to say, and while drinking the beverage at times, he was calmly lending his ears to the conversation.

「Hoho, the fake name was to fool the eyes of your parents, huh. What made you go so far to participate in this tournament?」

「Just testing my strength. Unfortunately, I couldn't test it out since there were only weaklings」

Certainly, with that much of a difference in strength, it was quite a disappointment. If there was an opponent who was even a bit worthy, then………

「But that red-haired kid you fought against in the finals. Wasn't he quite good?」

「Ha, don't make me laugh. With that level, there's not much difference between him and a rock fallen on the roadside」

「Aren't you harsh. As for me, I was about to call out to him too–」

「What did you say?」

Although it couldn’t be said that it was harmonious, that spot’s mood that was by no means dangerous froze up instantly. What Harold emitted abruptly was unmistakably anger.
Exposed to the pressure that was grave enough to almost overawe him, Cody involuntarily flinched. Although he didn’t know which part of that conversation touched Harold’s nerves, it was apparent that he rejected Cody getting in contact with Ryner.

「………But that seemed to have been a delusion. Ahaha, I give up. Somehow recently, my misunderstandings seem to have increased. Maybe I’m getting old」

「Humph」

Although he tried to poorly gloss over it, for the time being, it seemed as though he managed to avoid problems. But still,why did Harold dislike him trying to help Ryner, to this extent.

(Maybe he has some kind of emotional attachment towards him. Come to think of it, the final battle too seemed somewhat like he was trying to instruct him)

At first, he had thought that Harold wanted to harass him, but until the end, he had never directly attacked Ryner. Although it seemed to have been fought in the same way as he had done throughout the tournament, even though he had made all his other opponents until then concede within the blink of an eye, he was different towards Ryner.
Without using that speed which was his greatest strength, he had received Ryner’s attacks, and had either parried or evaded them. By Harold doing so, Ryner had been cornered, and he had unleashed power that had crossed his limits. If said in other words, Harold had been trying to draw that out.

(Well, only he knows the truth though)

Although he was curious, it wasn’t information that was necessary at the current situation. The most important thing was whether Harold was interested in joining the chivalric order or not. Wanting to loosen the stiff air, Cody once again started talking in a light tone.

「Well then, once again, let’s get to the main issue. Harold-kun, do you want to try joining the Saint King’s chivalric order?」

「……….」

Folding his arms, Harold remained silent. Even for him, there might be many things he needed to think about. Thereupon, waiting for the right time to speak within the silence, Itsuki opened his mouth.

「Um, Cody-san. If I'm right, then only those above 16 years old can join the Saint King's chivalric order. Harold-kun is still 13 years old, you know?」

「Hm, well, generally it's like that. But exceptions always exist in everything. Even one of my acquaintance had also entered at an age of only 14 years」

「Exceptions, is it」

「Right, right! Well practically, it's very rare, right? It means that that is how much talent and potential I feel from Harold-kun」

This was genuinely the truth. Listening to the words talent and potential, even Itsuki closed his mouth. Since it was the him who had been seeing Harold much more closely than Cody, he could understand many things.

「Within those exceptions, who was the youngest to have entered?」

Harold, who had been silently thinking, asked such a question.

「It was the 14 year old boy who came up in this conversation. His name is — Vincent」

'Didn't you implicitly want to know?' with those feelings included, Cody said that name.
Vincent Van Westerfort.
Called the "Strongest" by the Saint King's chivalric order, he was made out to be a monster by them, and was envied by many people as a hero.

「………..Fine then. Let me join the chivalric order」

But when he heard that name, Harold laughed. As though showing his thoughts of wanting to challenge the strongest.

Episode 29

Although Harold had immediately agreed to Cody's invitation, when thinking normally, it wasn't something that could arbitrarily be decided by a child. Maybe due to feeling curious about it, Itsuki incessantly asked Harold about how he would convince his parents, after Cody left. But as for Harold, he didn't think that it would become a huge obstacle.

Harold's parents were the type of people who were obsessed with appearance and titles. And entering the Saint King's chivalric order was considered to be an extremely honorable matter.
Since the chivalric order was a force different from the county's military, an elite troop directly under the control of the King. There was also the past that his father, Hayden, was aiming to join it when he was young.
If those parents' beloved son was to be scouted by the chivalric order that was an elite troop, then what would happen was as clear as day.

Harold, who had obtained the Cody's contact address, as though he had no more business with this city, left Delfit the next day.
Without even stopping by the Sumeragi territory along the way, Harold, who had returned to the Stokes mansion after a journey of 2 weeks, immediately reported to his parents.

「What is it, wanting to speak formally?」

「There's something I needed to inform father and mother about. While I was staying in Delfit, I was scouted by a person from the Saint King's chivalric order」

「What! Is that true!?」

「Yes. If I wanted to, it would be immediate, it seems. I'll be the youngest person in history to enter」

「Amazing, Harold!」

「I want to enter the chivalric order. Is that fine?」

「Of course!」

As he had predicted, their reactions after listening to him were superb.

Especially Hayden's delight, it didn't seem to be ordinary. The dream that he couldn't achieve in the past has been accomplished by his son, was what he might have been thinking.

When he had gone to watch Delfit's fighting tournament together with Erika, they had encountered rioters who were making an uproar, and when he splendidly suppressed them, he was scouted-when he spouted out some convenient story like that, they didn't even doubt him at all. On the contrary, saying,「A banquet!」, they immediately started preparing for a celebration. Although they understood, it seemed as though they had no intention to stop him.

(Even the chivalric order leaves for danger zones though. Even if for argument's sake, what will they do if their eldest son were to die?)

While looking at his ecstatic parents, he was thinking of such things. Well, since he had had the intention to join the chivalric order even when he knew that it would be dangerous, not being allowed to join it would be troublesome. And also, even Hayden was a militaristic man, so he must have understood about those matters.

And so, Harold, who had promptly received his parents' acknowledgment, went around the mansion, which was in a flurry for preparing for the abruptly held banquet, as though it had nothing to do with him, and called Norman and Jake, and while at it, even Zen to his room. Harold informed the 3 of them.

「I'm going to the imperial capital to become a member of the Saint King's chivalric order. Although the Sumeragi hold the initiative for LP farming, even if there's no movement, periodically inform me about the situation here」

「If it's the imperial capital, it's quite distant」

「It isn't a distance that can be covered by fast horses, and if we want to get in contact regularly, it'll be limited to using letters」

「In that case, it'll take a bit of time」

「Not a problem. In the case where you have to notify me immediately at any cost, cooperate with the Sumeragi. I'll inform them beforehand」

「Understood」

To grasp the movements of the Stokes house even when he’s absent, he arranged a way to communicate beforehand. It was for the sake of responding as fast as possible when the situation changed if by chance any indications of turbulent movements were to appear.
But there was a person who interrupted them.

「P, please wait for a moment! Harold-sama, you’re entering the chivalric order?」

「That’s what I said. Are your ears there for decoration?」

「No, no, no, even Norman-san and Jake-san simply just let it go, you know! Isn’t it a normally outrageous matter!?」

Zen was quite agitated. A normally outrageous matter-leaving aside whether it was grammatically correct or not, he understood what Zen was trying to say. But since it was troublesome, Harold decided to ignore him.

「That’s all. Immediately return to your work」

「Yes」

Norman and Jake bowed and left the room, and even Zen, who seemed as though he still wanted to ask him something, left with them. When he was alone in the room, Harold exhaled slowly. It could be taken as breathing deeply or as sighing.
The emotions put into it, whether they were the feelings of loneliness due to leaving the house that he had gotten familiar to or whether they were the feelings of liberation being able to escape from his parents eyes, Harold himself was unsure which it was.

3 years.
That was the amount of time since he had come to this world without even understanding the reason. And within that, he had spent the most amount of time in this mansion, inside this room.
It wasn’t as though he felt nothing when he was going away from that.

Nonetheless, entering the chivalric order was a predetermined route for the sake of following the original work. It was just that the schedule had accelerated up a bit.

Harold, who had promptly made a decision to stop his heart from wavering, with the polite speech and ingratiating smile that activated only in front of his parents, suitably spent his time at the grand banquet which was held the next day to celebrate his joining the chivalric order. Not even waiting for a month after he had been scouted, Harold quickly departed from the mansion.

Holding the reins in a completely familiar manner, he rode on a horse for a few hours. For the sake of meeting up with Cody, he reached the toll booth set up in the middle of the specified highway.
Even though it was called a toll booth, it was an establishment not for collecting tax or goods, but for checking whether there were any suspicious people or people who were trying to carry in dangerous or prohibited goods. A stone wall had been erected as though to blockade the highway, and one couldn't move further if one didn't pass through it.

Harold, who was equipped lightly, was able to easily enter the toll booth after clearing a light luggage search. It was quite lively since simple tents to rest one's body were set up and merchants on their journey had, while taking a break, opened up compact stalls.

Finding a group that were donning white armor in one corner, Harold got down from the horse and went towards them while walking. After he got closer by a certain extent, the other side also noticed Harold's existence, and while waving his hands, Cody raised his voice saying, 「Oooi!」. Due to that, the group's gaze concentrated on Harold.

「Well, well, Harold-kun. We met again much faster than I expected」

「I didn't come here to meet you. More than that, don't break your promise to let me enter the chivalric order, alright?」

「I'm telling you, it's fine」

There was no reaction even though he tried pushing him. Honestly, he was still doubting whether him being scouted was really true or not. Harold knowing Cody's personality made it even more harder for him to erase those thoughts. Well, since although he might deceive but not outright lie, the possibility of scouting him itself being a lie was low.

「Say, no way Captain was talking about this kid, right?」

As though wedging into the conversation, standing next to Cody, a girl wearing the same white armor as him observed Harold as though she was appraising him.

「Hm? That’s right」

「You’re joking right? Isn’t he still a kid?」

Although, the one saying that had an appearance of a 17 to 18 year old girl. Although what the girl was saying was right since in this world, if one became 16 they, would be treated as an adult, from the senses that Harold had, the girl too was still a child. Instead, it was obvious for him to feel that he was the adult since his mental age was more than 20 years.

「Ha, then are you a miserable small fry even lower than a kid?」

That’s why, unintentionally, these words suddenly came out.

「Wh, what did you say!?」

The girl, who didn’t think that he would retort back like that so clearly, took a step backwards due to being bewildered. And there, the girl’s back bumped against something. When the girl turned back due to realizing who that was, as though substituting herself, he was pushed into Harold’s field of vision.

Huge. The first thing Harold thought was that. And next, he realized that that frightening face looked somewhat fiendish at a glance. Being exposed to that stare, it’s intensity was enough to make one submit unconditionally. While being frightened enough to almost let out some weird voice, he probed the mood of the man who seemed like he wanted to say something.

「Do you also have a problem with me? In that case, I’ll make you understand with your body together with that girl」

Naturally, his inner state of being frightened wasn’t shown outside. But at that, every single person except Cody appeared as though they were surprised. The man with the scary face asked Harold, who was worried thinking,’Maybe they drew back because my mouth was too sharp?’

「Y, you………aren’t you afraid of me?」

「I don’t understand what there is to be afraid of you. After all, even if we fought, I would be the one to win」

Harold’s mouth, without minding his true feelings at all, easily disregarded the man’s question. There had been no talk about winning or losing and this man was also from the chivalric order. Since he had enough strength to join it, it wouldn’t be just for mere show. He wanted to restrain using aggressive words as much as possible towards a person who would become his colleague. Well, Harold himself knew that he couldn’t expect this mouth to give consideration towards matters like that.

「You people, Harold-kun has only been invited and he still hasn’t officially become a member of the chivalric order, alright? To start with, how about at least introducing yourselves?」

「S, sorry about that. I’m called Robinson」

「………Aileen」

「I’m Shido! I welcome you, Harold!」

The man with the tall stature and frightening face was Robinson, the harsh girl next to him was Aileen and the man with orange hair that could be associated with a lion’s mane was Shido, was how they introduced themselves. And hearing their names, Harold’s body stiffened.

(Aren’t these guys also characters who will die!)

That was the reason. Cody quitting the chivalric order, in other words, his motive for founding Friel. The cause was because he let Robinson and the others, who were his direct subordinates, die in a certain battle.
In the original work, behind Cody’s easy-going attitude, he blamed his powerlessness in his heart, and was always worrying whether him turning back on the chivalric order had been the right choice.

Although in the final stages of the game, that kind of hesitation and inner conflicts could be resolved, the problem was that if things went in the same way as the original work, then Robinson and the others would die. A detailed explanation regarding their death hadn’t been shown in the narrative. In one of the scenes in the game, Cody would speak out their names while gazing at the moon, or Cody’s past becoming clear after he loses subordinates in an event, only these kinds of fragmented information was shown. Naturally, there was no way something like their character settings existed, and even concerning their visual appearance, he had only seen them now.

Even if he wanted to save them, because the information was almost nonexistent, he couldn’t come up with any plans. The only thing that he knew was in which battle they had participated and lost their lives. And more than anything else, if by chance they survived, it would mean even more derailment of the original work. This was because if Robinson and the others were saved, the probability was exceedingly high that the story of Cody quitting the chivalric order and founding Friel was going to be destroyed.

If that were to happen, the events that could originally be cleared by borrowing Friel’s power wouldn’t be possible. In the worst case, it would be checkmate.

In other words, Harold was compelled to make a choice. Would he give priority to his survival rate and let them die without helping them. Or would he become resolved for the destruction of the original work by evading the future that awaited Robinson and the others.

Even if it was uncertain, exactly because he knew the future of this world, he understood that his choice was literally to either kill himself or kill others. Even while knowing, but still he had to choose.

Harold keenly realized that this might be the fate, which seemed similar to a curse from which he could escape by no means, that was determined upon him the moment he decided to live as Harold Stokes.

Episode 30

「………What do you guys think? About Harold」

When they had started preparing for camping since the sun was sinking, Aileen lowered her voice and asked. Being questioned, Robinson and Shido exchanged glances, and after a short pause they each answered respectively.

「Isn’t he a good kid?」

「He’s strong?」

「I do think that he is somewhat strong, but there’s no way he’s a good kid」

All of a sudden being insulted as a miserable small fry lower than a kid, there was no way Aileen could accept Robinson’s opinion.

「Is that so?」

「After all, it’s just that Robin is thinking like that because someone wasn’t afraid after meeting you for the first time」

「That is, well……..」

He couldn’t deny that his impression of Harold, who didn’t even seem to be afraid or perturbed regarding his greatest complex, was certainly high.

「Either way, since he wasn’t frightened by Robin, doesn’t it mean that he has gone through his fair share of fights?」

She couldn’t voice up any objections towards Shido’s opinion. All of them mostly had the same opinion. Frankly speaking, it wasn’t wrong to say that Robinson’s face was a deadly weapon. His appearance was so atrocious that even an adult would quake in fear. All the more if it were a kid, and for a kid around Harold’s age, it wouldn’t be strange for them to burst into tears. That was the three’s common perception.

Although it wasn’t particularly arranged beforehand, the three’s gazes simultaneously concentrated on Harold. That appearance of him adding twigs to the fire while making a displeased face could only be seen as a kid appropriate for his age. But in reality, since he was recommended for the chivalric order at an age of only 13 years, he must be hiding an absurd amount of power.

They couldn't affirm it because they still hadn't seen his strength with their own eyes, and also because he was acknowledged by Cody, whose irresponsible behavior was standing out, they couldn't believe it. Although, they knew in their heads that there was no way he would invite him as joke. And suddenly, Shido muttered.

「Or rather, let's try to directly talk to him」

No sooner had Shido said that than he quickly finished constructing the tent. And then, he plonked down without any reservations in front of Harold, with the fire in between them and started talking to him.

「Yo, Harold. Is it fine for a bit?」

「What is it?」

「It's nothing much, just that we only know each others' names, so I thought maybe we could deepen our friendship a bit」

「…….Do what you want」

Even while making an annoyed face, Harold accepted Shido's proposal. Seeing that reaction, Robinson and Aileen also got closer.

「By the, I had wanted to ask from before, but where did you meet the Squad Captain? The person himself isn't telling no matter how many times I ask him」

「At Delfit's fighting tournament」

「That's where we had been garrisoned………」

「Ah, are you perhaps the child who knocked down the drunkard?」

Robinson's memory flashed back. Because Harold was far, Robinson couldn't confirm his face, but when he thought back to it, his physique and atmosphere was quite close to the boy in his memory.

「You knew about something like that, huh」

「But I think that Captain didn't invite you at that time though………」

「That guy came right after the first day of the tournament got over. He didn't open his mouth because him slacking off might have gotten out. Since he wasn't wearing the armor」

「…….Come to think of it, there was a day where he left all the patrolling to us and disappeared somewhere」

That day being hectic due to Cody abandoning his duties was still a recent event in the three's memories. Listening to Harold, Aileen groaned, 「Squad Captaain ～ ?」, in such a low voice that it seemed to creep on the ground and went towards Cody. Her eyes were glazed over.

「What happened to that girl so suddenly?」

「Aah, she went to drop lightning or something on the Squad Captain. It's usual」

Although he was severely remonstrated after the fighting tournament, it seemed as though that anger had returned. While Shido laughingly explained to Harold that this was a scene that he would get used to even if he didn't want to, Robinson, who had a puzzled face for some reason, entered his vision.

「……….It seems as though Harold-kun participated in the fighting tournament, but was it in the under-13 division?」

「That's right」

As though implicitly wanting to say, 「So what」, Harold narrowed his already sharp eyes even further. While being somewhat pressured, Robinson continued talking.

「What was the result?」

「Isn't it obvious that I won」

Harold declared as though it was natural. Shido, sensing Robinson's intent in asking that question, closed his mouth, choosing to see how things would go. And then, Robinson approached the heart of the matter.

「……..That day, when we were patrolling the town, an enormous bolt of lightning struck from the sky. And from what I've heard, it seems as thought that was a magic used by the victor of the under-13 division」

That is to say, the one who brought down that lightning bolt, if the rumor he had heard was right, was Harold. If that lightning strike had indeed been brought down by Harold, then could agree with Cody recommending him for the chivalric order without waiting for the stipulated age. That was how tremendously strong that magic was.

「Was that your magic?」

「………『Bolt Lance』」

With the sun about to completely sink, a flash cut through the dusky sky. A single long lance of lightning fired off towards the sky rose up to higher altitudes. The bolt of lightning that seemed as though it would disappear beyond the sky like that itself struck a monster, a large ominous bird that was about 3 meters, and knocked it down. The monster that was burnt black was completely annihilated.

「This is the answer. Are you satisfied?」

Harold, who had annihilated a monster with a single strike of magic that was activated with no preliminary actions or chants, without changing his expression by even a little bit, spat out in an annoyed tone.
Robinson and Shido were dumbfounded at the event that was too abrupt. At a place a little away from them, even Aileen, who had been scolding Cody, was gaping blankly without being able to grasp the situation. Cody, who was the only one that wasn't perturbed, escaped from the lectured with an 'Alright!' expression on his face.

「What's wrong, Harold-kun. I'll be startled if you suddenly use magic though」

「Because you couldn't explain about me since you ran away wanting to protect yourself. Don't make extra work for me」

「If you say it like that, Onii-san will be troubled since I can't say anything in response」

Without even looking troubled in the least bit, he laughed away the harsh words from Harold. And then, he made a 'pon' sound with his hands as though he had hit upon a great idea, and without even seeming to feel even a bit of the heavy atmosphere, he changed the topic.

「But, well, leaving that aside, even the sun has set, so how about we have dinner soon. Wasn't there some pickled kujimana[1] still remaining?」

As though nothing had happened, Cody rummaged around for the snacks for alcohol. Looking at him, not only Harold but even the other three sighed as though they were exhausted.

◇

Inside a tranquil room, only the sound of a pen running over a parchment was heard in a constant rhythm. There were no gaps within the bookshelf furnished on one side of the wall, and looking at the books arranged in the order of their titles, the methodical personality of this room's owner revealed itself.

The owner, Vincent Van Westerfort silently continued moving the pen. Maybe due to facing the mountain of documents for a long period of time, he lifted his face while massaging his shoulders which as expected were feeling tired. Facing him was his aide, Shannon, who was also immersed in paperwork like him.

Thinking about taking a break soon, when he was about to call out to her, he suddenly realized that it quite noisy outside the window. While thinking whether there was any training or something today, he peeked outside and found out that a crowd had formed in the training grounds.

「Vincent-sama, did something happen?」

「Shannon, was there any joint training for today?」

「There shouldn't have been any schedule issued for it……….」

To Shannon, who was inwardly tilting her head due to not grasping the reason for the question, who replied like that, Vincent pointed outside the window.

「That is………. it seems as though the people from the platoons have gathered there. I can see some of the Troop Leader's faces」

The question was what they were doing there. Thinking from how Vincent hadn't heard about it, it might be a matter that could be solved by their own judgment.

「Ya-hoo. Is Vincent here?」

While he was puzzling his head over what kind of gathering that was, the door to the office was rudely opened without even being knocked. The voice that came simultaneously with the door opening was one that couldn't be simply

expressed as one that he had gotten sick hearing, of his crony's.[2]
That old friend's name was Cody Rujial. Although there was a difference of heaven and earth between vice captain and squad leader, their relationship was one where they knew about each other so thoroughly that it was enough to make them sick.

And so, since Cody had appeared here, he instinctively perceived that the clamor in the training grounds was his scheme. When he thought about it, he hadn't seen Cody's appearance for the past few days. During that time he might have plotted something.

「It's you, huh. What is this clamor?」

「It's not good to make assumptions, Vice Captain-sama…….. though you're right. There's going to be an enrollment exam held for a newbie right now, so please pay attention」

「Really, you are…….. I just beg you not to cause any problems」

「That depends on that guy」

'Kukuku', laughed Cody trying to stifle it. Even for Vincent who had known him for a long time, that laughter, as though Cody was really enjoying himself, was something he hadn't seen for a long time. Was the existence whom he called 'that guy' making him do so?

「For now, look at the training grounds from here. Perhaps, you might be able to see something amusing?」

After saying only that much, Cody left without even closing the door. In the room that had once again regained silence, sighs from the 2 people overlapped.

「That person is as boisterous as always」

While closing the door that was left open, a little bit of disgust came out of Shannon. For a diligent person like her, Cody, who behaved irresponsibly, wasn't a very likeable existence. Although she wasn't harsh because she knew about his personality and him being Vincent's old friend, her true feelings were that she wanted him get it together.

「That uninhibited nature is by birth, there's no way it would get fixed after all this time. And also, in public places, he is a person who can behave suitably」

「I understand, but……….. I think that how Vincent-sama deals with him is soft」

Hearing the word soft, Vincent's heart ached as though it was pricked. From when was it that he had started feeling guilty towards Cody? If it looked as though he was dealing with him too softly, the cause was surely because that.

Originally, Cody wasn't a person who would fit into an organization like the chivalric order that honored tradition and law. The person himself understood that. But still, he had lived here for more than 10 years. In this place that was suffocating him and wasn't suitable for him.

「……….No, the one that isn't truly suitable is me」

「Did you say something?」

「It's nothing」

As though wanting to avert his eyes from the negative feelings that were welling up, he shook his head. While trying to gloss over the words that unintentionally leaked out, Vincent threw open the window. A gentle breeze blew into the room. While being brushed by that wind, he breathed out heavily.

「Let's take a break for a while, Shannon-kun」

「Then I'll prepare some black tea」

「Ah, thank you」

Although he couldn't grasp Cody's true intentions, since he said that much, there must have been something that he wanted to show him. It was that guy. There was also the possibility that he would show something worthless.

But, that smile of Cody's just now crossed through his mind. It was carved long ago into his memories, something that made Vincent remember his longing. That's why, he felt that he wanted believe in it. A nostalgic Cody's smile, like a boy unable to contain his amusement without being able to wait to see the other person's reaction.

TL –

1. Some kind of eatable in that world maybe.

2. The word used is kusare en which translates to undesirable but inseparable relationship.

|

Episode 31

In the imperial capital Amajil, there was a castle called Regalia castle. It was the so-called royal castle where the royalty that ruled over the country lived, and it was also the place where the high level executives that managed the country discussed affairs.
This Regalia castle was situated at almost the exact center of the capital and because it was erected on an artificially built rectangular platform, it was a symbolic structure that could be seen from anywhere within the capital.

And at the foot of Regalia castle, stone walls had been built as though to enclose the platform. Those walls had 2 places at the north and south where gates were placed, and the distance to the castle from the walls in a straight line was about 150 meters. The space that expanded between the platform and the walls in the form of passages surrounding the castle didn't only function as a fortress in the times of emergencies, but was also the core of the military unit directly under the supervision of the King, the Saint King's chivalric order.

Starting form the headquarters that supervised the whole chivalric order, lodging for the residence of the members and training grounds for them were included, and excluding the people who were on long term expeditions or placed at other locations, all the members of the Saint King's chivalric order ate and slept within these grounds.
While receiving this explanation from Robinson and the others, Harold partially ignored it while waiting for the time to come. By the way, inwardly, even now he felt as though his legs would give out when he looked at Robinson's face.

Even at the time in the middle of their journey towards the imperial capital, when he was pressed for confirmation of him being able to use magic from Robinson, he had spontaneously fired out magic due to fear. Although he had conquered his fear to a certain extent by fighting against monsters, Robinson's appearance was shocking enough to shake even that mental strength.

「………Rather than that, where did that guy go?」

「I think that he'll come back soon. Well, it's fine to simply wait without minding it」

「’In the meanwhile, become an exhibit’, is it? Don’t screw around」

As if his inward annoyance was oozing out, Harold spat that out. His true feelings were unusually in agreement with his words. The reason was the situation that surrounded Harold and the others currently.
At the training grounds that was being used for inter-personal combat drills, Harold was standing stock still while being surrounded at a distance by a great number of the members of the chivalric order.
That face was irritation personified. After they arrived at the imperial capital, when he thought they were passing through the chivalric order’s establishment directly, the person responsible disappeared before he knew it, and on top of it, because he had been neglected and left as an exhibit, it wasn’t unreasonable that he was like that.

「Yaa yaa, Sorry for the wait」

Without even noticing even a little bit of Harold’s irritation, Cody returned in his usual lax manner.
Restraining his urge to send Cody flying with a kick, Harold demanded an explanation about the situation for now.

「You bastard, where had you gone. To begin with, who are they?」

「Sorry, sorry, I had some small business, you see. And, I want Harold-kun to fight with those guys. The thing called enrollment examination?」

「What?」

Harold wasn’t the only one who reacted to Cody’s words. All the members who had gathered also burst out in murmurs. It seemed as though they too hadn’t been given an explanation beforehand. And then, a bearded man questioned Cody.

「What’s this, Cody. We only heard that we’ll be testing the fledglings though」

「That’s right. This fight will act as both that test and also as an enrollment exam for him」

With those words, all gazes concentrated on Harold. And what everybody were thinking was voiced out by the bearded man.

「By enrollment exam, you mean for that kid? No matter how you look at it, he hasn't reached the stipulated age」

(This conversation again……… And also, as expected, he doesn't go through any ordinary means, this bastard!)

He'd predicted that there would be something looking at Cody's personality, and it was just as he had thought. Since it had already proceeded up to this extent, it wasn't as though he hated it so much, but Harold wished that Cody had at least talked to him before. Well, most probably he would have kept quiet due to some stupid reason like, 「I thought I would surprise you」.

「In the first place, although they're called fledglings, they've already trained for more than 2 years and even though it's a small amount, they also have experience in real fights. For a kid, they're opponents that are a bit too much」

What he had said was reasonable. Although the amount of people who wanted to join the chivalric order was huge, the acceptance rate was quite low. Also, many people would quit after becoming members of the chivalric order due to the harsh training, and if they failed the test after enrollment, they would be dealt as leaving in groups.
The majority of them were eliminated like this, and after surviving even harsher training and real combats, 3 years after their enrollment, they would finally be able to escape being treated as newbies.

They would get treated as first-rate a few years from then, about 5 years from the enrollment. Mind and body, unless both of these were tough, they wouldn't be able to reach it.
In the first place, the only ones that would be enrolled were those whose superior talent and strength were acknowledged. Among them, those who were selected even though they were inexperienced were the ones called "fledglings" by him.

「Those things are fine. Since this child is an extraordinary talent」

But Cody didn't even pay any attention to that very reasonable opinion. On the contrary, he said this towards the members who would fight against Harold.

「Instead, if you guys underestimate him and attack lightly, you'll have a painful experience so be careful. Or rather, if you guys are able to defeat Harold-kun, it's fine for me to recommend you for the next promotion examination」

The way he said it was similar to saying that those at the level of new recruits couldn't defeat Harold.
If he said so much, there no way anyone in the chivalric order wouldn't get unhappy. Although they were still new recruits, they had completely devoted themselves to training and had achieved their current title. They had the conceit in the effort they had piled up and the pride of being a member of the chivalric order.

Even though it was like that, being brought as an opponent for a child's enrollment examination and having themselves being seen as inferior wasn't a good feeling. Instigated by Cody, it could be felt with one's skin that the members of the chivalric order were thinking of overturning the assessment that could only be thought of as unreasonable.

「Well, since it's like that, do your best」

With a face that was saying 'I've done it now', Cody lightly clapped Harold's shoulder. But with only this level, Harold's arrogance didn't even bend. From the beginning, accumulating combat experience had been the next most important issue after evasion of death flags.
Although he was somewhat mad at this surprise attack like development, the situation that was prepared itself was something that he wished for.

「Cody」

「What is it?」

「Let me praise you」

While speaking out arrogant words in his usual manner, the corners of his mouth rose up spontaneously. He often felt it after he had possessed this body, a high which could also be called as fighting instinct. That passion was lit in his heart, and the heat was spreading throughout his whole body.
He calmly grasped that in a corner of his mind. It wasn't the first time he had felt like this.

It was the same when he crossed swords with Itsuki and also when he had confronted a monster for the first time. That thing which appeared in front of a battle that made him feel strong tension was probably something like the vestiges of the original Harold.
Only by defeating strong opponents could he flaunt his strength, his excellence. He had drowned in the joy that could be obtained by doing that. Therefore, the original Harold absolutely didn't acknowledge a thing like defeat which would be like denying himself. That was why, after being defeated by Ryner in the original work, Harold craved for even more power and because of that he led himself to ruin.

(In a sense, he's a battle junkie. Although, his nature was nasty because he didn't genuinely want power, but because he would be envied and glorified for being strong)

That was the original Harold's true nature, but ironically, it wouldn't become a flaw in the current situation. Although the origin was warped, basically, the stronger the opponent was, the more his desire for victory increased. And those thoughts would influence his movements during the time of battle.
To make him more faster, more sharper and more accurate.
Stronger the opponent, more disadvantageous the situation, the sharper his body and techniques would get. It had already been verified during repeated battles.

However, recently, starting with the bouts against Itsuki, he had been getting farther away from tense battles against strong opponents. This was because he had gotten used to it while he was increasing the number of fights.
But now, this time's enrollment examination that was going to be conducted due to Cody, was something that satisfied both Hirasawa Kazuki's motives and Harold Stokes' craving for glory.
While taking up a stance after removing his sword from its sheath, Harold opened his mouth turning towards the members of the chivalric order.
He just wanted to normally say, 'please treat me well'.

「Start attacking from those who want to lose」

Obviously, the words that were actually spoken out were as usual, and like Harold wished for it, were completely different words. Maybe because these words had pushed him, a single youth walked out from within the group. An uncommon amount of fighting spirit was overflowing from those eyes. He was completely serious. Harold smiled wryly thinking how this mouth was really a genius at instigating people. For the others, it might have looked as though he was sneering.

「Squad Captain Cody, is what you said just now the truth?」

The youth that walked out saluted and questioned Cody. Those movements and his manner of speaking were brisk.

「Of course! Well, that's only if you win against him though」

「Yes, thank you very much!」

After saluting like a role model, he turned towards Harold.

「Boy, sorry but I'll be getting serious. But still, this is also a good chance for you to know how small your world actually is」

「Much obliged for your very fine opinion. As a thanks, let me have you grovel on the ground」

Stomping on the youth's words, Harold stepped forward and faced him. With those 2 at the center, a tingling sense of tension started spreading out.

「For now, anything is fine as long as the both of don't die or try to kill each other. Well then, start whenever you want ～」

「Stepping forward!」

When Cody called out in voice that was too light contrary to the situation, almost simultaneously, the youth rushed towards Harold. As expected of being trained thoroughly, his movements were fast. Even the sword that was swung down from the overhead position had a considerable amount of power. But that was it.

Harold, who slipped through the sword strike coming down from above, stepped in towards his opponent's chest and thrust the sword edge at the chain-mail on his abdomen.
'Gakin!'- with a metallic sound, the youth moved as though he was knocked, retreated 2 to 3 steps while staggering, and then fell face up. It seemed as

though the stab's shock reached towards the armor's innards and caused him to faint. Cody peeked at the collapsed boy's face.

「………His eyes are completely spinning, this is hopeless. Oi, somebody, get a stretcher」

「Yes!」

After seeing off the youth being carried away, Harold once again sent a sharp gaze towards the knights.
Pierced by that sharp gaze, some of them were pressured and shrunk their shoulders. But without without minding that, Harold invited them.

「Next, come」

Harold had something he wanted to confirm and also wanted to test and see in this examination. That was why, for now, he pushed aside any unnecessary thoughts and concentrated on fighting.
The one who came forward next was a brawny man who had a larger stature than the previous youth. Without opening his mouth, he gave a bow. When they faced towards each other, this time, Harold moved first.

Firstly, as a trial, he lightly crossed swords. While they kept on exchanging blows, he gradually increased his speed, but the man was able to easily keep up. When his speed became as fast as how it was when he usually fought with Itsuki, the man was still unperturbed. As he had heard, they seemed to have considerable strength. Confirming that, Harold took some distance temporarily.

And then, he unraveled his stance by loosely hanging down his sword and exposed a defenseless state. Surpassing intrepidity, a warped smile as though looking down on his opponent was plastered on that face. This was what was written on the completely provoking face – 'Come and see'.

Maybe the man couldn't tolerate that behavior that spoke more eloquently than words. He came slashing at Harold. That speed was remarkably faster than the first exchange, and the strike was much more stronger.
Harold parried that with his sword………something like that didn't happen. While still loosely hanging the right hand that gripped the sword, he did nothing but evade his opponent's strikes. It seemed as though he had no intention to shift to the counterattack, and he was seriously observing his opponent's behavior while

he was attacking incessantly. For the time, it was about a few minutes. By doing nothing but evasion, he got confirmation.

(I thought perhaps, but it actually existed, huh. Characteristic motion)

Characteristic motion was as it's name said, it indicated movements that were already fixed. Game characters each had their own motion that was fixed. The person whom Harold was confronting now was a member of the chivalric order, in game specifications, a character called "Knight 1".

As the game 『Brave Hearts』 progressed, one would battle the "Knights", who appeared as enemy characters, many times. They didn't hold a setting other that a knight's, in other words, existences that were called small fry characters. Therefore, various movements, motions were unified. Those became the characteristic motions of the knights.

The occasion on which he had realized that characteristic motion existed in this world was during battle with monsters. At first, he was doing his fullest to only just fight, but as he got used to combat, when he got the leeway to observe the opponent, he realized that they were using movements that he was familiar with.
The attacks unleashed and the timing and category of magic that was used from then on completely matched with the movements in the game screen in his memories.

Naturally, the times they showed motion that wasn't there in the game was many, but still being able to know the opponents next move would become extraordinarily advantageous. Due to that, his sense of stability in battle rapidly increased. That was why, Harold thought like this next – Wouldn't characteristic motion exist even for human characters?

But although it was fine until hitting upon that possibility, the problem was that he had no chances for fighting against characters that he knew. There were no opponents for him to ascertain it. The thing that unexpectedly came by at such a time was Delfit's fighting tournament. Thinking that he might be able to fight against mob characters that were identical to the knights, he decided to participate.
But when he actually looked at the situation, his opponents were only kids.

Ryner, the only person whose characteristic motion he knew about there, still hadn’t reached the age he had been in the original work, and so, hadn’t come with movements like in the game.

But today, after about a little less than 2 years had passed since he had hit upon it, it was verified that Harold’s hypothesis was right. Of course, although there was further need for much more inspection, there was a high possibility to obtain the advantage of reading ahead even in inter-personal combat. And so, since Harold was naturally in a good mood, that atrocious smile’s deepness kept increasing. And it was indeed easy to evade the knight’s sword that had many strikes due to characteristic motion, and Harold, who continued to evade with a paper-thin difference as though he had enough to spare, seen from the others around him looked as though he was playing around with his opponent with a clear difference in their power.

Maybe getting impatient at the present condition, the knight took some distance. Thereupon, he somewhat lowered his center of gravity a little and took a posture as though he was bracing himself. This was the motion when knights activated magic. A light blue magic formation emerged at the knight’s feet. For Harold, if he that much information, he could narrow down the magic.

(No matter which magic, the knights’ motion is fixed. And a blue magic formation, they can only use 1 category of the water attribute magic. That means, the one that he is going to use is –)

Harold stuck out his left hand forward and spoke the name of that magic.

『Aqua Slash!』

When the both of them simultaneously yelled that out, an innumerable amount of water blades appeared in midair. The blades which were about 30 cm long, each went flying towards their respective opponents, but they clashed exactly at around the middle of the 2 of them, and due to that shock, a sheet of water was raised up and then it died out.
This too was what Harold had aimed for.

In the original work, once magic was activated, it could only be either evaded or defended against. Neither physical attacks nor magic could negate it. But that was only a specification inside the game. If it was this world, magic could be negated by magic. This had already been demonstrated.

When Harold looked at him, the opponent’s face was dyed with shock. Naturally, even he knew that magic could be negated by magic. But that was a phenomenon that happened only by pure coincidence in the middle of a battle and even mistakenly wasn’t something that could be “aimed” for. Although the technique of hitting magic, which had a fast attack speed, with magic itself was difficult, fundamentally if magic weren’t intercepted by magic of the same attribute and scale, it couldn’t be negated. The action that Harold showed in the fighting tournament, of negating flames by lightning, was accomplished only because the magic was more powerful than the opponent’s and it was forcefully suppressed.

And on top of that, basically, until the magic was activated, there was no way to perceive what kind of magic the opponent would use. If one tried to stop magic using this method, then there was a need to constantly fire high powered magic. Frankly speaking, it’s efficiency was poor and it wasn’t something that could be included in tactics. That was the common sense with regards to this world.

Nonetheless, that was something that was in regards to this world and that kind of common sense wouldn’t work on Harold. Recovering from the shock, the man once again shifted to the offensive. But that speed and sharpness from until before wasn’t present in the attacks. Both sword and magic attacks’ accuracy became rougher. For the people who didn’t understand the trick, Harold had simply flaunted his overwhelming talent. It wouldn’t be strange if they had even gotten disturbed. Because, if it were like this, both evasion and defense would become easier.
He completely read all the movements of his opponent, and handled him while being absolutely safe. And the moment his opponent exposed a big gap, Harold drove in a single strike which became a counter and defeated him.

Harold didn’t rely on his speed which could even be called as his greatest weapon. This was because of thinking that if he just kept relying only on his speed, someday he might fall into a situation where he couldn’t deal with it using his speed.
Therefore, there was a need for him to improve his combat techniques and at

the same time, there was a need for him to make sure how effective his current techniques could be. That was why this enrollment examination was killing 2 birds with 1 stone, but had the value of 3 birds.

「It's annoying to deal with each and every one of you separately. While at it, I wouldn't mind even if all of you come simultaneously, alright?」

While feeling sorry for using them for his selfish motives, Harold continued provoking them so that they could fight with all their might.
His mouth that excelled at instigating opponents was in perfect form today too.

◇

「Amazing, that boy………..」

Shannon, who was standing next to Vincent, described the spectacle unfolding below her as though she was befuddled. What that simple word 'amazing' indicated, was the black-clothed boy that was engaging the members of the chivalric order in a huge scuffle within the training grounds.
Towards that, Vincent only replied with only a small「Yeah」.

Certainly, it was amazing. It could even be called magnificent. The boy stopped all the attacks precisely no matter what kind and whenever he attacked, he would almost always finish the fight in a single strike. He was dealing with both offense and defense perfectly. A boy who had come to take the enrollment examination and one who wasn't even 15 years old.

The impression that Shannon expressed was very natural and correct. There was no room to insert an objection.
But because of that perfectness, Vincent was feeling an extraordinarily huge sense of discomfort.

(What is going on? This is too perfect)

The way the boy fought was something one couldn't do if they didn't know their opponent's movements beforehand. It was different from a safe and steady battle.
Because of it flowing too smoothly, one would unintentionally doubt whether it was a sword battle that was arranged beforehand.

This didn't simply consist of only predicting the opponent's attacks. He wasn't simply evading everything aimlessly, but rather was continuing to choose the optimum place to evade or defend while considering the next attack. That itself, if one didn’t have foresight, they wouldn’t be able to eliminate unnecessary movements to that extent and it would be arduous to dish out attacks. One couldn’t help but think that such a person would always “know” 2 to 3 moves ahead.

It was true that there was a fixed style of fighting in the chivalric order. Especially the new recruits that the boy was fighting, that style had been beaten into them as the basics. After learning it, by going through real battles, they would combine it with their own battle style and would continue to optimize it. Vincent himself, although his current style hugely varied when compared to his former style, it wasn’t wrong that that style was the base.
Well, only a small handful of the powerful people in the entire chivalric order had such huge variations. In other words, what he was trying to say was that the boy, who should be an outsider, that was thoroughly familiar with that style wasn’t “amazing”, but “strange”.

(Right, it’s weird. It would be impossible to have such an efficient battle style by only being strong or experienced)

Then how was it that the boy was making the impossible possible. If he were to think about it, there was a possibility that that boy had crossed swords with the Saint King’s chivalric order in battlefields. That too, not once or twice, but enough times to memorize their style and swordsmanship, combinations, their timing for using magic and their attributes, and the actions that would become cues for these things.
Even if that were true, it was plenty enough to think that there was a possibility of him belonging to a hostile power. If such a person were to come to take the enrollment examination, then probably, their aim was to conduct some maneuvering activities by infiltrate into the chivalric order.

「………..Shannon-kun, there’s something I want you to do」

「Please give any order you want」

「I want you to gather all the battle records of the Saint King’s chivalric order within the past 10 years. Everything from large-scale battles to battles with only a single squad and even small scale fights of individual levels」

「When is the due date? If even individual level records of the order's members need to be gathered, then it'll take some time」

「I don't mind. Gather the others while I'm investigating the large-scale battle records」

「Understood」

Shannon respectfully bowed her head. Normally, he would feel like smiling wryly at her politeness, but he wasn't in the mood for that now.
Predicting activated magic and negating it, they had been investigated enough for such an absurd thing to be possible. Even habits that they themselves hadn't noticed might have been discovered. It would be easy to send the boy away by failing him, but that was too dangerous. This wasn't something that could be ignored.

In that case, they would draw him here and while observing him, try to investigate where he belonged to. There was also the possibility that there existed spies other than him that might have already infiltrated inside the chivalric order or the kingdom. In that case, they could use him to reveal the other spies.

「It'll be fine if it's just needless anxiety……….」

「Were you saying something?」

「No, it's nothing. Let's return to work, shall we」

「Yes」

While seeing the black-clothed boy take on 20 people, they once again returned back to their paperwork.

Episode 32

Speaking from the results, Harold magnificently passed the enrollment examination. That was obvious since he had taken on about more than 30 knights and defeated them while he had been almost completely uninjured. Since dealing with movements that didn't stick to the characteristic motion would be nothing if one had Harold's reflexes and physical ability, in the latter half, him getting used to it also helped and it was to the extent that he felt as though he was doing some monotonous work. When he realized it, even the high he had felt in a long time had lessened.

But although he passed, there were also problems. It was the fact that although it was an extremely difficult matter, a part of the people couldn't feel anything good towards the newcomer who had beat up his seniors.

「The newcomer called Harold, is that you?」

「………So what」

「Since it seems as though you have a huge attitude, we were thinking of teaching you how the newbie should behave」

That is, what he was trying to say was, without even 10 days passing after his enrollment, situations where he would quarrel with senior knights whenever there was any time, started occurring. 'Is it fine for Knight-samas to be like this', were Harold's frank thoughts. Even with them, who were brave and honorable when seen from outside, it seemed as though not each and everyone was a good person.

That said, thinking how they could do such things so coolly, when he questioned Shido about it, it seemed as though personal fights using weapons or magic were prohibited. And it also seemed as though a considerably heavy penalty would be given if one broke the ban. That was why they attacked with their bare hands. And obviously, they attacked Harold aiming for when he was unarmed too. It seemed as though it was done under the pretense of unarmed combat training and not personal struggles without weapons.

After doing the laundry which was assigned to the newcomers and drying them, in front of Harold, who was returning to the barracks, were 4 senior knights standing shoulder to shoulder. Harold openly breathed out a sigh. He didn't care if that attitude conversely instigated them even more. For them, no matter what Harold did, it would get on their nerves. 'If a person is detestable, then even their clothing is detestable', was a saying that was well said. Even if they were to thrash Harold, they would probably still be unable to stand him.

If so, it wouldn't be alright to simply get beaten up. If he couldn't avoid being hated then he was fine with leaving it like that. Frankly speaking, it was meaningless to simply keep them company. There was only a single action that Harold could pick here.

Bending both his knees by a little, he dropped his center of gravity. Looking at the posture where it seemed as though he would throw himself upon them even now, the four of them increased their vigilance, but that backfired. Unleashing the strength stored in his legs, Harold's figure disappeared leaving behind a 'whoosh' sound of cutting through the air. Due to their visions narrowing because they were too concentrated on Harold in close-range, their eyes weren't able to keep up with that speed. As a result, they were late in reacting.

By the time they became aware that Harold had disappeared, he had already kicked the stone wall present on the right side and had accelerated towards the front. With that action that didn't even take a single second, he had left behind the 4 of them and instantly opened a gap of more than 20 meters. With this, there was nothing the 4 of them could do to catch up to him. By the time they turned back, Harold's back had already become distant.

Ignoring the angry「Wait!」s that could be heard from behind, he headed towards a busy place. Because if there were some people, it would be hard for even them to start a quarrel. If he just let it go like this, it would end without needing to take them on.

(At any rate, if there are a huge amount of people like those guys, then even Vincent wont' be repaid, huh)

While steadily pulling away, Harold was thinking about such things. Although Vincent was a person who would become a powerful enemy in the game, he himself was a good person at heart. As a human, as a knight, his personality was to always be righteous.

『Knights are the sword of the Kingdom and also its shield』

That was his belief, but what Vincent was trying to protect wasn't just the King. According to him, a Kingdom was all its citizens.
Borrowing the lines from the narrative –
『A nation exists only because of it's citizens. If there is no nation, then there is no need for a King. That is why, leading the nation and creating a bond (means) of peace for the citizens is the duty of the King. In that case, so that both parties fulfill their own duties, us knights are the ones that eliminate the threats that attack them and the ones that open up the future of the nation!』
Vincent was a man who honored justice, valued etiquette, saved the weak, remonstrated the ones who were wrong and mercilessly slayed the ones that would harm the citizens.

Without a mistake, he was righteous. And he was strong enough to also assert and put that righteousness into practice. Although, it could also be said that he was like that because he had compelled himself thinking that it wouldn't do if he weren't like that. As a result, after the game's Vincent had stuck to his beliefs, he had been crushed by his own ideals and his heart had broken.

Although the topic had digressed a bit, to put it simply, picking on others in the name of training that stuck inside the chivalric order like some bad tradition, was very far apart from the ideal knights and the state of organization that Vincent wished for. There was no way he would forgive these kinds of things, and he would most probably completely eradicate it once he became the Captain.
Thinking, 'I'd be happy if he could do so as fast as possible', as though it were other people's affairs, without slowing down, he managed to run away. The time was already past noon. While thinking of having lunch, he returned the wicker basket used for laundry to the barracks and went towards the grand mess room. If it was there, since there would be many people at this period of time, they wouldn't blatantly try to quarrel with him.

This was a completely digressing topic, but the dishes in the basic menu in the grand mess room was free of charge. In the case of high grade dishes or when a side menu was supplemented, it would generate some money but it wasn't a considerable amount.

With the meals being neither too much nor too less, Harold, who wasn't picky, innocuously ordered the basic menu and quickly sat down in an empty seat. And naturally, he was eating alone.

Harold, who frequently quarreled, was obviously avoided by his seniors and also by the other newcomers. Although they were called newcomers, there was certainly some kind of wall due to there being a difference in the time and circumstances when they had joined, but the primary reason was still that Harold would get caught up in a quarrel every single time. Since they were afraid of getting involved if they were with him, it couldn't be helped that they were hesitant to get close to him.

「Scowling today too, huh, Harold」

That said, there were always exceptions no matter what the situation. There was a man who sat in the empty seat right next to him. It was Shido. And as though they were being lead by him, both Robinson and Aileen sat down opposite Harold.

「What do you want?」

「Since there was a sad junior who was eating alone, the senior whose heart was aching thought of sharing the table with him」

「That's an unneeded favor. In the first place, even you don't have any good friends, do you? I haven't seen you with anyone other than these guys」

「Don't be ridiculous. I'm not Robin」

「I wish you wouldn't say something I can't deny……..」

Being suddenly hit by a stray bullet, Robinson became depressed. That figure of him mixing his soup with a spoon while hunching his shoulders was like a timid child.

Frequently meeting him since after coming here, even Harold had understood that the youth with this face and big stature called Robinson, contrary to his appearance, was timid and delicate, and on top of that had a quiet temperament. His appearance and insides were completely opposite.

And so, there was no need to fear him, but still it would take some time to get completely used to him. If he were suddenly appear in his vision, Harold would reflexively freeze up.

「By the way, you've become quite popular. Must be difficult to keep the seniors company」

Shido lowered his tone by a little and said that. It seemed like there were people who didn't think well of Harold in his surroundings too. Looking at how he was interacting in a friendly manner like this without getting influenced by them showed that Shido was a good person. Even Robinson and Aileen were looking at Harold with their eyes filled with concern.

「…….Certainly. Right now, I'm being surrounded by troublesome guys」

「If you can say that much, you seem to be fine」

Without even making an unpleasant face at those harsh words, Shido laughed loudly. In contrast to that, Aileen breathed out a sigh.

「Good grief, you're not adorable to an unbelievable extent. If you're like that, you won't be able to make any friends or find a lover」

「Buhahaha! You say lover, but you're the last person who should say that!」

「Did you say anything? Shido」

Before Shido could finish his sentence, Aileen's left straight burst forth. The thing that captured that fist was Shido's face. Shido, who had asked for the fist that had been swung without any mercy, had a red line flowing out from his nose.

「Ha, unfortunately I don't need such things」

「Well, that's right」

The moment he replied back to Aileen who was emitting an intimidating air, appearing out of nowhere, Cody put his hand on Harold's right shoulder. That face had its usual faint smile. Maybe because the other 3 were used to him appearing in this manner, they didn't show any great reactions. Although even Harold wasn't much different from them on the surface, inwardly, his heart was pounding.

「Since Harold-kun already has a fiancee. There's no need for him to make a girlfriend now, right ～」

Without even any special warning, Cody casually dropped a bomb. Due to being completely surprised, Harold wasn't able to react immediately. On the contrary, he committed a fatal error.

「……….Why do you know that?」

He ended up asking that question. With this, it became as though he was affirming that Cody's statement was true.While clumsily wiping the red liquid dripping down from his nose with his cuffs, Shido grasped Harold's open left shoulder.

「Let us hear it in detail, Harold. It seems as though you have a fiancee?」

「Right, right. Graceful and elegant, a very lovely girl to whom the words 'Refined young lady' suit perfectly」

Towards the question asked by Shido, who was drawing closer, for some reason, the one who answered was Cody. Although that too was irritating, more than anything, the problem was the way he spoke, as though he clearly knew about Erika.

「Oi, why do you know about her–」

「Her? Did you just say her? At that age, you're already acting like a husband!?」

「Eei, don't scream, it's annoying!」

「Well then, I'll return to my work. You guys, keep the clamoring within limits」

While he was having a hard time tearing off Shido, who was clinging to him asking for the details, the source that invited the clamor left while waving his hand languidly.
But there was no way this place would settle down with only that, and he was stuck dealing with Shido who was shouting, 「It'd be fine if it were a girlfriend, but a fiancee!」, and a shocked Aileen who was saying, 「To lose to a younger guy and that too, to one who is so unsociable like this……..」. Robinson was nothing but flustered trying to pacify the 2 who were like that.
It was quite a noisy noon.

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More than half the members lived within the barracks that dotted the chivalric order's headquarters. As a general rule, until a few years from enrollment, it was a cramped condition with 6 people in a room, but the treatment would gradually change depending on the years of service or the post as it would become 3 in a room or 2 in room. On the other hand, the people who had a family could live in their own house, and if one were to fulfill the established criteria, it would be possible for them to move out of the barracks even if they were single. The only thing that was absolute was that it was a necessity for one to live in the barracks with others for a minimum of 4 years from enrollment.

That being the case, if one were to become the Vice Captain of the chivalric order, they would be given a completely private room. Accurately speaking, they would be given an exclusive office that would act as a joint establishment of their residence, study and reception room.
As far as Vincent was concerned, it was something that was too much for him, but a space where one could live without minding the surrounding people was a well appreciated thing.

That was why, when Cody, who was an old friend, stepped into this place, his usual lax attitude grew worse. Since the need to mind each other's position completely disappeared. Even now, he had completely occupied the 3 seater sofa in the reception room by lying down face up on it. He had his knees raised and legs crossed, and while using his left arm as a pillow, he continued reading a report held in his right hand while skillfully turning the pages with only one hand.

「Hmm, from about 3 years ago, he applied to and participated in the subjugation expeditions, huh」

The report in Cody's hand contained all the information regarding Harold. But it was still just limited to the information obtainable from the outside though. The reason why he knew about Erika was also because of the fact that in a previous investigation report, she had been named as his fiancee and even her portrait had been placed. That too was also one part of the information that Vincent had asked to be gathered regarding Harold. After looking through it, Cody rose up and asked Vincent, the one who gave him this, of his real intentions.

「So then, what are you telling me to do by making me read this?」

「Soon, I'll put Harold in your squad. I'm sharing this information because of that」

「Oioi, it still hasn't even been a month since Harold enrolled, has it? Normally, enlistment is only after clearing the basic training curriculum, right?」

「I've judged that is is unnecessary. Just in case, I'll have him take up the final examination of the basic training curriculum, but if it's him, he will probably be fine」

「That is, well, you're right. But still, it's an exception among exceptions」

「Harold is outstanding. Due to that, there's no need to stick to the norm and a suitable training must be given. In the first place, since he has enrolled at an age of only 13 years and as the youngest person in history, no matter what is done, it won't change the fact that he will gather attention」

「The thing called following experience? But he'll stand out. More than presently」

「That is why I want you to become his windbreak」

For a short while, both their gazes collided. But even that didn't last long, and Cody, who was the first to avert his gaze, breathed out a long sigh.

「I understand what you are saying– the superficial reason」

「……… You've seen through my thinking, huh」

「It's not particularly to that extent. But if it were only for that reason, there would be no need to do this much, right?」

Saying that, he flung the report in his right hand on top of the desk. Cody's point was rational. And right from the start, Vincent had no intentions to hide his plan from Cody. It was only a conversation for formalities sake up until now, and the real issue was from here on.

「Say, Cody, looking at the way Harold fought during the enrollment exam, what did you think?」

「……..Needless to say,"Impossible", was what I felt. No matter what, him being able to move in that kind of way, where the countermeasures against the chivalric order was optimized enough for it to be conveniently done, was outside my expectations」

It seemed as though he too had hit upon the same doubt like Vincent. That was how inexplicable the movements that Harold had shown were.

「Even I agree. There is a need to investigate where he learned a fighting style like that」

「But Harold is a full-fledged noble, you know? That too, he's one of those stiff pure-blood faction that are rare these days」

Seeing through Vincent's thoughts, where he was having apprehensions that Harold had connections with organizations that were hostile towards this nation, Cody talked as though telling him to calm down.

「As a result, he might've killed a servant's family」

「Ah, I can't deny that……… but there were things like how he had been injured due to protecting soldiers, so you can't just simply judge him like that, right?」

「For the sake of making sure of that is also another reason for his immediate enlistment. There is a need to check his background and personality. These are jobs that I can ask only of you」

「In other words, you want me to monitor him, huh. I doubt that there is a need to do things to such an extent though」

「I can't just imprudently believe in him just because he is a noble. We have experienced that firsthand 10 years ago with Noheik's treachery」

「……..」

Towards Vincent's words, Cody couldn't help but be silent. He didn't even want to remember it, the betrayal of the one who was even called as the King's confidant, Kalem Noheik.
Kalem, who had also been the head of the historic house of Noheik, had leaked highly classified information and had received a large amount of money from the company he had been colluding with. Even the fingers of both hands weren't enough to count his charges. And among them, leaking information regarding the Saint King's chivalric order had also been included.

Kalem, who had been imprisoned, hadn't given a testimony with regards to the

incident and had committed suicide by banging his head a number of times against the wall. As a result, the incident had ended with the company he had colluded with being penalized, and even until now, they hadn't been able to properly grasp where and how much of the classified information had leaked out.
Kalem's betrayal and death had given a greater shock than due to the damage suffered by the nation because starting with the King, he had obtained the trust of his colleagues and even the masses.

「Besides, I haven't thought that that incident has been resolved. The negative inheritance he left behind, the people who conspired with Noheik in those days, are still lurking behind the center of the nation」

「………If you are going to this extent, then it seems as though you've grasped something. And so, you are saying that those guys might be there behind Harold, huh」

「Or, there might also be a possibility that there is a third party that obtained the information that Noheik leaked, but in either case, we can only just speculate. I do feel sorry for you and Harold. But still–」

「Understood. Alright, I'll do it」

The words, 'I have to doubt him', were overwritten by Cody.

「…….Sorry」

「Why is it that you are apologizing here. It's fine to say thank you or something. You are too earnest, much more than required」

「Because the guy who was always next to me did nothing but slack off. I might have become serious for his portion too. Even now, if he were to change his mind a little, it would be helpful」

「Oh, my ears hurt. Disperse, disperse」

Cody hunched his shoulders, stood up, and left the reception room in a hurry. Looking at the door, which had been closed with a snap, that seemed to have been superimposed by his old friend's back, even though he knew it wouldn't reach, Vincent spoke out a word of gratitude. Only a single「Thank you」.

Episode 33

That day, a particular barrack for newcomers in one corner of the headquarters of the Saint King's chivalric order was engrossed in a certain topic. The origin of the matter was the notification sent to the whole of the chivalric order a few days back. The contents were that a new person that had enlisted would come. Although enlistments that happened in the middle, without going through the open recruitment examination conducted every year, were certainly less, there was no need to make any special fuss about it.

Then the reason as to why it had become a hot topic was because the age of the one who had enlisted in the middle was far below the originally stipulated age. Since it was a boy of 13 years old. It was the enlistment of the youngest person since the establishment of the chivalric order. That itself wasn't a lacking subject, but since he had single-handedly defeated a few dozen senior knights during the enlistment examination, their curiosity about exactly what kind of person he was, was never-ending.

The newcomers of the same term who filled the barracks of the 94th term were especially noisy. The ones who were the most noisy were the members of the 7th squad of the 94th term who were to live together with the boy.

「Say, if that newbie is a guy like in the rumors, what to do?」

The leader of the 7th squad, Isaac, while fidgeting nervously, asked that question to his squad members.

「That again? The contents of the rumor are all unbelievable, and I think that it is a bit too far-fetched…….」

「But it seems the part about him beating up many of the seniors is true, so at the very least, he might not be ordinary」

「A brawny guy with a height of more than 2 meters and he clobbers his opponents without even using any weapons while none of the attacks work on him………. was it? I don't have the confidence to work with a monster like that」

「Actually, there are people who believe that he is a ghost formed from the collective grudge of the knights who died on the battlefield. That’s why attacks don’t work, it seems」

「Impossible……….. right?」

The words that were successively coming out of their mouths were the indication of anxiety they were feeling. This was because from the past few days, the rumors regarding the newbie were too unreal. The contents were things that should have been laughed off, but they couldn’t do so because there was some authenticity. But the things like him being a ghost were too crazy.

Therefore, lately whenever they were free they would express their respective speculations, about how he was like this or that, about the identity of the newbie. But that too would end today. Since the newbie, who was the center of topic, was going to come here today.

At that time, suddenly, without even a knock, the doorknob was pulled. The four’s gazes simultaneously concentrated on the door. While raising an old-fashioned creaking sound, the door gradually opened. And then, the one who appeared from the other side was–

「Excuse me for a bit. Are all of you here?」

It was a man with unkempt hair, which extended until the nape of his neck, and an unshaven beard. They didn’t know about the man since it had only been a few months since their enlistment, but recognizing that he was a superior officer by looking at the arm band on his shoulder, they took a posture of saluting him.

「Yeah, yeah, good work. I’ve only just brought the thing to be delivered, so I’ll leave the rest to you guys」

From behind the superior officer who stated that in a very careless manner, a boy with a height of about 160 cm showed his face. His expression was grim.

「You have quite the guts to treat me like an object, huh, Cody. Should I stuff you in a wine barrel and kick you out into the sea?」

When they were thinking that he might be nervous, without even hesitating, the boy abused the superior officer all of a sudden. With a spectacle which they hadn’t predicted at all in front of them, starting from Isaac, the other 4 froze up with their mouths gaping widely. Not only had the newbie, who had just enlisted, not used honorifics in front the superior officer, but had actually spoke in this manner. It couldn’t simply be settled with reasons like just because he was a child or because had some backing. It was a behavior that was very far apart from their common sense.

「At that time, I wish you fill barrel completely with alcohol too. With something I’m not able to drink usually, like Cognac」

「Be satisfied with low-class ale. It’s fit for you」

「That’s quite a cheap brand. There’s no way I can have low-class ale for the last drink in my life」

But even the superior officer behaved as though he didn’t mind it. Rather, he was even grinning broadly. While they were standing there with their heads still unable to process this abnormal situation, the superior officer left with a「Later」while swinging his hand. Thereupon, naturally, only the boy, who was brought by him, was left in front of them.

He wasn’t a brawny 2 m man like in the rumors. His noble features, compared to his age, gave off a somewhat grown-up impression, but it also gave off an immature impression suitable for his age. Black hair and clothes, and those crimson eyes that seemed as though it would suck in those who looked at them. Those eyes suddenly narrowed, and a sharp look captured the four.

「I’m Harold. You bastards, pay the utmost attention so that you don’t displease me」

As though it were natural, and also concise enough for one to unintentionally miss it, the boy who named himself Harold declared that. He was beyond cheeky, almost outrageous. Although they were contemporaries, as seniors normally they should have shown their anger, but when it was so outrageous, they could only be taken aback.

「…….. Um, okay. I’m Isaac. Pleased to meet you」

Isaac, who somehow responded even while being dumbfounded, could barely respond like that in an very polite way with a cramped smile. There was no one who looked at that figure as being pathetic for acting like that in front of a boy younger than him.

All of them were overwhelmed by that intense presence Harold held, not allowing them to say no. If one were to say pathetic, then without a doubt all of them were. This was, for the members of the 7th squad of the 94th term, their chance meeting with Harold, one they would never forget in their lives.

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Maybe because Harold was silent originally, after that, he only spoke for the minimum required amount. It was also because Isaac and the others couldn't speak to the silent Harold due to hesitating. They welcomed the next day with that atmosphere that seemed to choke them. During the early morning, when the mist still hung in the air, including the 7th squad, all new recruits that had been enlisted for less than a year were gathered at the outdoor training field. It was normal, the usual morning drill.

If something were different, then it was that Harold's introduction had been inserted before the start.

「Even you guys would have heard the talks, but this guy is the youngest in history to enlist, Harold Stokes」

Due to those few words from the instructor, murmurs spread about among the new recruits. Most probably, it was because he could only be seen as a normal boy unlike the man in the rumors. Almost all whispers were skeptical ones, doubting whether he was actually strong. Maybe because Harold, who was standing next to the instructor, hadn't heard those whispers, he didn't even bat an eye.

「As long as one has enlisted, age doesn't matter. Everybody are treated equally. Harold, are you prepared for that?」

「Don't ask foolish questions. Being treated equal to these guys is too lukewarm」

「It seems that it's true that you don't know how to speak. You can participate only after running around the training field 30 times! Go!」

Listening the instructors words, everybody were startled. Morning training was first warm-up exercises along with running 10 laps around the training ground, and after that working the body and practice swings. It wasn't rare that people were punished by being made to run extra laps around the field if they were judged to be late or slacking off. But still, it was rare for someone to be punished with 30 extra laps. It was the first time the recruits of the 94th term had heard this number in the less than half a year they had been enlisted. It seemed as though Harold's behavior had irritated the instructor considerably. Being handed the punishment, Harold started running without talking back. Immediately after that, the instructor raised his voice once again.

「What are you guys doing! Do you guys also want to run the same amount as him!? If not, start running immediately!」

Being driven by that voice, everybody simultaneously started running thinking, 'Please spare us from that'. 1 lap of the training ground was about 400 m. For 30 laps, it was about 12km. Even for them, it would take about about 50 minutes. For people around Harold's age, it would take more than an hour. It was unthinkable that he would have the energy remaining to participate in the training after finishing that.

He might drop out on the first day itself. Everybody thought so. But as they entered their 2nd lap, they noticed that something was strange. The gap between them and Harold, who was leading, hadn't decreased at all. On the contrary, it gradually became wider.

「No matter how you look at it, he's going too fast」

「If he's like that, he won't be able to hold up until 30 laps」

Some of the people who were running next to Isaac gave their frank impressions. Everybody thought that that was right.* But against those expectations, when they were in their 5th lap, Harold had left them behind by so much that they had fallen behind by 1 lap. But still, his pace hadn't dropped. Well-regulated breathing, steady body, hands and legs that were being moved strongly. That nimble running of his was far from his limits which made them feel as though he even had some leeway.

They couldn't believe it. If they were running at the same pace as Harold was, their breath would have most probably been faint by now. Harold glanced behind, and as though he was thinking, after a moment, he muttered to nobody in particular.

「Shall I raise the pace a bit more」

The once that picked that up shuddered, thinking, ‘He’ll go even faster?’. Instantly, Harold’s strides became larger. Proportionally, Harold steadily accelerated.

Almost simultaneously, their legs suddenly became heavier. The degree of fatigue they normally felt towards the end of morning training had already been accumulated at this point.
‘Why?’- This question rose, but was immediately cleared. Lured by Harold, even their paces had increased. Even their breath had started rising. Remaining 4 laps. Just becoming conscious of that was painful enough to almost stop their legs.

Due to their pace being disrupted, by the time they finally completed 10 laps, they were 5 minutes late compared to their usual time. Despite that, their fatigue was heavy. But the most surprising thing was, a few minutes after they had finished running, Harold completed his 30 laps. With an astounding speed. Even the instructor was making a face as though he was seeing something unbelievable. And Harold, even while sweating, hadn’t broken that refreshing look on his face.

「……… It seems you have considerable stamina」

「Naturally. I haven’t done training weak enough to be exhausted by this level」

「Hou. Then for the form practice next, I’ll have you swing this」

Maybe thinking that the punishment wasn’t enough seeing that Harold’s haughty manner of speaking still hadn’t reduced, the instructor handed Harold a lengthy sword that wasn’t normally used for form practice. Since the blade was long, due to its weight and the centrifugal force it would produce, handling it would become extremely difficult. With that body where his frame and muscles still hadn’t developed, just swinging it properly would be difficult.

But that was only common sense. Including the instructor, everybody that were present here were starting to vaguely sense that Harold was an exception that didn’t adhere to that kind of common sense. Maybe paying attention to the others, Harold took some distance from them after accepting the longsword, and probably wanting to confirm the sword’s center of gravity and the burden it would give off, he swung it freely as he pleased. The way he freely handled the sword looked as though it was a dance.

It was at that time. A gust of wind blew. It wasn’t strong enough to be called a gale, but it shook the trees and scattered their leaves. The green leaves in midair were led by the wind and flowed towards Harold. The moment the green leaves passed in front of his eyes, Harold unleashed multiple sword slashes. Since the speed was astounding, to Isaac, the sword seemed blurred and he could only see afterimages. Most probably, it was the same for the others too.

It was obvious that Harold’s action of that wanting to cut the scattering leaves. ‘Is that even possible?’, were their frank thoughts. To cut the irregularly moving leaves that get blown away by the sword’s wind pressure would demand extraordinary skill and kinetic vision.

But Harold was the type that could actually execute it. 6 leaves which were slashed by sword, tore. Cut vertically and horizontally like a cross, they became 24 pieces. The leaves that were cut were blown away by the wind and disappeared towards the horizon. Without paying any attention to them, who were watching that in a daze, Harold stared at the longsword seriously.

「Humph, not bad」

He was just trying out the sword. It was only a trial, and it was natural that he could do it. Harold’s attitude indicated that.

Including the longsword, the blades of all weapons that were generally classified as swords were heavy. Cutting leaves fluttering in midair like before was difficult. If it were to be done, then only the part of the sharp tapered point, of a few mm, used to pierce opponents should be used.

Only the point of the hard to wield and heavy longsword could accurately cut an object with irregular movement which was literally light enough to be blown by the wind and limp enough for its shape to easily change. If the slashes missed by even a single mm, if the gap was different by even a single hair’s width-it was a move that couldn’t be accomplished if even just slight differences like these occurred.

How high was Harold’s ability if he could easily accomplish such a thing. The rumors that they had heard about how he easily overpowered a few dozen senior knights were most probably true.

Every single person in the 94th term understood. Harold was at a level where they couldn’t possibly reach. They realized it instinctively. It was close to the momentary instinct a wild animal held against its natural enemy. An absolute rank as though it were already determined at the time of their birth.

2 days after enlisting, Harold seized every single person of the 94th term by showing his overwhelming ability.

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Episode 34

Waking up at sunrise, the new recruits would do the morning training for about 2 hours. After breakfast, they would do miscellaneous jobs within the chivalric order, and depending on the situation, they would patrol around the city following behind their seniors like ducklings. And after lunch, they would do nothing but train. When it was actually done, it was quite a hard schedule.

It had already been more than about 2 weeks since he had continued this lifestyle, but there had been no changes with Harold. This was true for both himself and his surroundings. To start with, with regards to either stamina or ability in training, he had no troubles. No matter how much he moved, his stamina limit wasn't found, and he could finish any training no matter what it was.

On the other hand, due to his mouth that continued to throw out rash remarks towards his superior officer as though he had no idea about the concept of TPO, it was troublesome since supplements kept on being added to his training menu. Although he had a body that could easily complete the increased training, thinking about how the instructor's impression about him was crawling on the ground, he was fearful everyday thinking that he might be asked to leave before long.

It was as usual with his surroundings, where he was avoided by his contemporaries and was always getting caught up with the anti-Harold force. By the way, he didn't know much about his roommates. This was because he was always training during his free time due to not being able to stand the silence in the room. It had completely changed into a room that he used only for sleeping. That is, other than his human relations being in a devastating condition, there were no particular fatal troubles for now.

And so, today, when he was going to find lunch in preparation for the afternoon training, he was abruptly called to the instructor's room. When Harold, filled with trepidation, went towards the instructor's room thinking, 'No way, am I really going to be dismissed?', without any preface, the instructor informed him.

「Harold, you'll take the final examination of the basic training course」

「The final examination?」

「That's right. If you succeed, you'll openly graduate from a new recruit and be enlisted」

Thinking, 'Come to think of it, there was something like that in the code which consolidates the rules of the chivalric order', he dug through his hazy memories. If that memory was correct, then only those who had enlisted for more than 1 year were qualified to take up the final examination of the basic training course.

「I thought that it still hasn't even been a month since I've enlisted though? It seems as though the flow of time is different here」

「It's an exceptional case this time. It has been judged that your strength has already far surpassed the limits of the new recruits」

「That was already known at the time of the enrollment examination. Well, I'll praise you for your judgment to make an exceptional case」

Even towards his superior officer, he spoke in a condescending manner as though it were natural. For Harold, he couldn't help but think that it was mystery as to why they still hadn't chased him out with that crazy attitude of his. And he was also surprised at the sudden final examination. But he had no hesitation about taking it.

The original work's Harold's official post was unknown, but thinking about he would sometimes bring his subordinates along, it could be guessed that he had some high position. Harold himself had no interest in position, but he would lose nothing if he could move around freely to some extent.

「The final examination is in a few days. The content will be informed on the day of the exam, but make your preparations for going on an expedition」

「Is that all?」

「Yeah, that's it. Wish you good luck」

「There's no use in wishing. Because the result is obvious」

Towards the instructor's encouragement, he didn't even honestly say, 「I'll do my best」. With this, if he were to fail, he would become a laughingstock. Harold

renewed his conviction to at least strive to be sincere in his actions.
4 days after that. Quickly, the day of the final examination arrived.

While donning the noisy armor that also symbolized the chivalric order, he proceeded step by step. Bathed in the sunlight that was coming from the sun that was almost directly overhead, there were 9 shadows. It was a composition of Harold and the 4 from Cody's squad, 2 platoon leaders, a company commander and his aide.

If the contents of the examination were to be summarized, it was field training. Currently, they were in the middle of marching towards their destination. This too was a part of the training, and they had roughly continued walking for about 3 hours.

「How is it Harold, are you starting to get tired?」

While he was silently moving his legs forward, a voice came from behind. Rather than worry, that tone contained intentions of teasing him. Shido, who was the owner of that voice, didn't appear to be tired.

「If I look like that to you, then go see a doctor. But it might already be too late」

「Aren't you quite composed? As expected of having participated in subjugation expeditions in your territory」

「……… Why do you know that? It was the same last time too」

「Last time? What are you talking about?」

「Don't play dumb. You knew about Erika」

「Ah, Harold-kun's fiancee」

Cody emphasized the fiancee part. Harold had dug his own grave. It was foolish of him to bring that up. Feeling suspicious about Cody having obtained information about him for some reason, Harold, being in a disadvantageous situation with Cody at the front and Shido at the back, kept silent. It was the so-called tactical retreat. However, he received a pursuit from an unexpected direction.

「That's interesting. Does Stokes-kun have a fiancee?」

It was the side-part haired company commander, Sakrith[1], to whom suit seemed to be more suitable than armor. Behind that elite bureaucrat appearance, maybe he liked this kind of topic. And due to Sakrith leading on the topic, everybody’s gazes concentrated on Harold. Frankly speaking, he was used to this, but still, he wouldn’t feel right if he just ignored him.

「……..Yes, so?」

Without being able to deny it by saying it was just a front, the instant he answered, the tension shot up. Especially the aide, whose face immediately stiffened. As expected, talking informally with a company commander might not have been permitted. Resigning himself to just accept the admonishment here, he prepared himself and waited for the shouting. But, what came back was a faint wavering voice filled with sorrow.

「Is that so, is that so…….. Even a boy 20 years younger has a fiancee, but when it comes to me………」

Sakrith started mumbling something. Cody and the 2 platoon leaders were peeking at that situation, where the aide was trying to cheer him up with a「It’ll be alright!」, while trying to stifle their laughter. It seemed as though the fault wasn’t his disrespectful attitude, but that he had stepped on Sakrith’s landmine. While thinking of how the members of the chivalric order who didn’t have lovers seemed to have the same reaction, Harold glanced at Aileen.

「I’ll destroy you」

The moment their eyes met, he was warned so. He wasn’t sure as to what she would destroy, but she was being quite unreasonable. It was a behavior where he could understand why she didn’t have a boyfriend. No matter which part of the body, since it would be unbearable to have it destroyed, he turned forward and concentrated on walking. But that too was interrupted soon.

「2 Hammer Treants! They are approaching in this direction!」

Robinson raised his voice. When they looked, trees of about 5 m tall were using 2 branches about as thick as their trunks like crutches and were drawing nearer. Naturally, they weren’t normal vegetation.

Hammer Treant was a monster in the shape of a tree. The huge branches that were used for movement were also swung around like cudgels to destroy their opponents, defense and all, which was why they were prefixed with the word Hammer. Since there were things like eyes and mouth on their trunks, they were also called human-faced trees. Without a doubt, they were vegetation, but it was possible for them to predate on animals using their mouths and turn them into nourishment. There were no exceptions even when humans were their opponents.

「Hmm, it seems that we are the targets」

「Since there are still a bit distant, we could get away, but if they were to go down the hill behind us, the highway is there」

「Then we should bring them down here itself. Stokes-kun, you–」

「Don’t ask me to step back, alright?」

Harold declared his intention to fight while interrupting him.

「Running into Hammer Treants was unexpected. It won’t have any influence on the examination’s results」

(It won’t!?)

Thinking that since this was field training, dealing with unexpected situations like this was also a part of the examination, and deciding to go all out, backfired. That said, it wouldn’t look good if he were to withdraw now. And also, Harold still held a grudge against Hammer Treants for putting a crack his ribs. It was just right for a revenge match.

「Like I give a damn about the points. That one is mine」

「……..Understood. Just in case, I’m sending Lukas and Selim to support. Don’t force yourself」

With Sakrith’s order, they split up in 2 directions with Harold and the 2 platoon leaders in one and the rest of them in the other. The Hammer Treants were also lured by those movements and split up. It was a chance to crush each and every person.

「We’ll be behind you. You can fight without any worries」

「I’m looking forward to seeing that rumored strength of yours. But as soon as you find it dangerous, immediately fall back, alright? Originally, that is a very pressing opponent for new recruits」

Lukas and Selim encouraged Harold by patting his back. They were extremely reliable seniors.

(Come to think of it, these people have no hostility towards me. That itself helps me)

But the person himself had enough complacency to think about such things. Although he called it a revenge match, he felt no particular emotion. Even during that day when he was injured, if he hadn't tried to protect the soldier, it would have been an opponent that he could have defeated without much trouble. Much less when it was an unexpected situation that occurred during the examination. He wanted to defeat it quickly without needlessly wasting any time.

Without even drawing his sword, he walked towards it with unfaltering footsteps as though he was taking a stroll. In contrast with him, the Hammer Treant switched to attacking. It raised it's right branch– hammer, and struck down towards Harold.
'Dogoon!'- with a heavily destructive sound, a cloud of dust rose up and the ground shook. Harold evaded that attack by leaping up.

But with him floating in midair, he became the perfect target. In a flash, the left hammer attacked Harold. It was a timing at which he couldn't avoid a direct hit. But Harold did a quick spin in midair, and with his right leg clad in something that looked like a violet aura, he kicked the attacking hammer down.

『Artillery kick》』[2]
Similar to Heavy Palm Knock, it was a heavy strike technique in unarmed combat. It was a kicking skill also called as 『Axe kick》』 among the players. Originally, artillery kick was a skill that was inserted in the middle of a combo, but differing from Heavy Palm Knock, its power was reasonably high even when it was used on its own. But still, since the attack's reach was short, it wasn't used much on its own. By the way, he didn't quite know what the violet effect that was generated like in the game was, but since it naturally appeared even when he thought it wouldn't, he just convinced himself that it was something like that.

The Hammer Treant's hard branch and Harold's right leg clashed. It was a collision of Harold, who weighed about 50 kg, and the Hammer Treant that weighed about a few hundred kg. The level of the masses were too different, and normally thinking, the lighter one would be blown away. But even accepting that, the original work's characters were existences that their opponents would feel as though they would bring about results that were to the extent of being called irrational.

The moment they clashed, a shrill sound resounded. The one that was defeated was the Hammer Treant. Not only that, but with a thud, the edge of the branch was buried in the ground. The hammer was crushed, and at the part that had been kicked, the bark was ripped off.

Lukas and Selim were looking at that scene in a daze. Even the others that had been fighting the other Hammer Treant were gaping at this scene, but for now they gave higher priority to bringing it down. Using the buried hammer as a foothold, Harold approached the trunk, and after finally removing his sword from the scabbard, he stabbed it deep into the Hammer Treant's mouth. And then, without even giving the it the time to cry out in pain, Harold ended the fight.

「『Flame Sword』」

Flames erupted from the sword that Harold was gripping. But the pain of its insides being burned directly, for the Hammer Treant, it lasted only for an instant. Harold cut straight upwards with the sword still thrust in its mouth. Due to that, the Hammer Treant was cut right in half from the inside by the flaming sword, and was burned to death.

The close to 5 m tall body separated into 2 parts, and in the blink of an eye, it was wrapped in flames. While blazing, the Hammer Treant fell down to the ground. It was a battle that didn't even last a single minute. The fight was literally an instant-kill.

TL-

1. The name is サクリス(Sakurisu)
2. The kanji -鳳仙脚. And also in furigana -ほうせんきゃく (Housenkyaku)

Episode 35

Without coming across any large-scale monsters after encountering the Hammer Treants and without any particular problems arising, the field training continued without any delay. A large part of the final examination was combating monsters. And the monsters that were to be fought against were already decided beforehand while taking the new recruits' strength into consideration. Mainly, it was from small-scale monsters that could be defeated individually to mid-scale monsters that could be defeated using coordination.

But there was no way they could conveniently encounter the monsters that they were aiming for, and in those cases, it wasn't rare to camp around the living habitat of these monsters for a few days. Therein, not only combat ability, but also stamina, resilience and also the ability to coordinate with comrades were observed. This time, since only Harold had appeared for the final examination as an exceptional case, although the progress rate was considerably fine, it was unavoidable that it would take some time while they were on alert or when they were searching for monsters.

Eventually, the final examination completely ended only after 3 days from its start. At the end, by the time the Basilisk had been defeated, it had already grown dark. While Harold and the others were making preparations to set up camp on the riverside, Sakrith looked back on events that had occurred in these 3 days.

The basic training curriculum's final examination held in a hurry with its only participant being the boy of hot-topic, Harold.
There was the fact that his age was only 13 years, but the most surprising thing was the fight against the Hammer Treant. If only new recruits had to defeat large-scale monsters like that, it would be difficult if more than 4 of them didn't fight together.

That was why Sakrith had sent the platoon leaders Lukas and Selim as support, but Harold had easily defeated the Hammer Treant without borrowing their strength. He could declare that even for him, it would be impossible to slaughter a Hammer Treant at that speed. An absurdly high combat ability. He was made to realize what kind of people those outstanding talents that could carve their names in the history of the chivalric order were.

Since Harold had so much strength at this age itself, it might be obvious that it was the cause for his arrogance. Sakrith thought that this was the cause for his overflowing confidence, snappy attitude, and his words which disdained people.

But looking at it the other way, it could be tied to selfishly taking independent action. Because the more one was like Harold, who were confident in their strength, the more they tended to disdain cooperating with their comrades. No matter how strong one was, there were limits to what they they could do alone. Getting worked up thinking, 'If he isn't able to understand that, he won't be able to pass so easily', was only for a short while.

When the time came for him to cooperate with Cody's squad, he handled it without any flaws. At first, there were parts where their coordination wasn't smooth, but as the number of times they did it increased, those parts also improved. And when it was the 3rd day, it even reached a point where they could display stable combination. And that was only possible because Harold had adjusted his level to the members of Cody's squad.

If only individual strength was considered, then Harold was above Robinson and the other 2. If they tried to adjust to Harold's skill, then they would be nothing more than baggage. Only because Harold had held back his strength was it possible for them to coordinate smoothly.

Although he was abusive from beginning to end, his conduct was one of trying to make use of his comrades' strength and erasing their weaknesses. Even though he had higher strength, without having anything to do with him looking down on them, he respected them and even excelled at working with them. He was a boy whose speech and conduct wasn't in gear at all.

If he really looked down on his comrades as worthless existences, then he wouldn't have been able to coordinate this well. Although he thought so, on the other hand he couldn't help but think that Harold's strength was high enough to do even this no matter what his true feelings were.

All throughout the examination, he wasn't able to grasp Harold's true nature. That said, Harold's results were so good that there was no way for him to fail

Harold even by mistake. However, he felt an indistinct sense of discomfort.

While he was being bothered by that, the examination ended and they started moving so as to return to the Royal Capital by the next morning. They departed at 6 in the morning, and if nothing were to happen, they would return before the day came to an end. Forming ranks in the same way as they had come, they had lunch en route and progressed without any delays. Eventually, by the time they had traversed more than half the distance from the Capital, that happened.

「What is that?」

The one who noticed it first and raised his voice, was Lukas. To that, everybody's gazes concentrated towards the front. A few hundred meters from Sakrith and the others, a dark red something was squirming.

「……… Is it smoke? No, for it to be that, it's color and movements aren't normal」

「It's somewhat hazy though」

「Perhaps, a monster of some new species?」

Each of them voiced their speculations, but it wasn't as though they were able to ascertain it's identity. Since it was on their way, for now, they decided to approach it for confirmation, but among them, Harold's face was grimmer than usual. The ones who noticed it were Sakrith and another person.

「Harold-kun, do you know what that is?」

Cody asked in a whisper. Only Harold and Sakrith were able to hear it.

「Who knows. But if you don't feel anything from it, then you bastards have lost quite your edge」

Being questioned, Harold answered without moving his gaze away from the dark red body. He didn't know why the boy was feeling so much danger from it. But he would soon come to know that Harold's senses had hit the mark.

Becoming distinct after they neared it, the dark red body was like mist. Its form was similar to a column, and as though it was oozing out from the ground, after it rose to about 150 cm high, it was dispersing. But other than that, they weren't able to find a single clue that came close to finding out the dark red mist body's identity.

「Is something buried?」

The instant Shido bent his knees and tried to lean over, the mist swayed greatly. That part transformed as though it possessed a will. Simultaneously, Harold's sharp voice flew.

「Get back!」

「Eh? Uo!」

The formed sickle bent like a whip and attacked Shido. The one who pulled Shido, who wasn't able to deal with the abrupt change, by his nape to evade the attack was Harold, who had leapt while shouting. It was precisely a hair's breadth. If he had been late by even an instant, then Shido's head would have been cut off by the mist sickle.

His bangs, which seemed to have been cut by the mist sickle, fluttered down. Understanding what had occurred, Shido, with a somewhat blue face, expressed his gratitude towards Harold.

「Y, you saved me……… Thanks, Harold」

「That doesn't matter. Stand up immediately, you blockhead」

It was a very harsh manner of speaking to someone who had just almost lost his life, but that was how pressing the situation was. That was because before they knew it, a few more dark red mist bodies had appeared.

「We're surrounded!」

「What the hell is this?」

The mist bodies had appeared as though to surround them. The 6 mist bodies, including the ones that had newly appeared, uniformly formed sickles and started moving as though drawing a circle. Looking at this bizarre and unreal spectacle, everybody tottered.

There was a single person who didn't waver at this creepy scene in front of him. After a single breath of time, Harold started attacking the mist without any hesitation. It was a speed which he hadn't shown in the examination. Sakrith was astonished by his seemingly endless ability, but meanwhile, Harold cut the enemy using that untraceable speed.

The mist body that was attacked looked as though it was dispersed……. but immediately, it became the same as before. After repeating it for a few times, Harold returned back towards them.

「Physical attacks don’t work. Even if the blade comes in contact, the sword just goes through. Also, we probably can’t defend」

「On top of that, their attacks are effective, huh……..」

Looking at how Shido’s hair was cut, there was no mistake. Attacks were ineffective against the enemy, and they were exposed to undefendable attacks.

「T, there’s no way we can win against something like that……..」

「Won’t it be fine if we just run away!?」

Robinson and Aileen, whose experience in falling into unexpected situations was shallow, were flustered. Shido too hadn’t recovered from fear. With their conditions, combat would be impossible. When he was about to make them fall back temporarily, Harold rudely remonstrated them.

「If you have the time to be flustered, work your head. If you don’t want to die, draw your swords. 『Bolt Lance』」

With a crackling sound as though the air was being ripped, an enormous lance of lightning was fired. That lance which boasted more than enough power to kill the enemy directly hit one of the mist bodies. Due to that, the mist dispersed, but once again, it immediately returned back to it’s original state. But as though he didn’t even care about that, Harold consecutively fired magic.

「『Flame Column』『Aqua Slash』」

The effect immediately became visible. The mist body that was engulfed by Flame Column regained its former shape as though nothing had happened, but the one that was hit by the Aqua Slash dispersed, and as though drifting towards the sky, it disappeared.

「Water attribute magic is effective, huh?」

Harold fired Aqua Slash towards the mist objects in rapid succession. Every attack made a direct hit, but only a single one disappeared due to the magic. The other 4 were same as before. The answer that could be derived from this was–.

「Only magic of a specific attribute is effective, huh」

「The attribute that is effective changing depending on the specimen is a problem」

「Are you bastards morons? Before complaining, hit each and everyone of them with magic」

「You are quite right」

Harold, Cody and Sakrith simultaneously fired magic. Lightning rained down incessantly, massive flames surged and winds blew violently. The grasslands which were green turned into scorched earth before their eyes.

After all the dark red mist bodies disappeared, Sakrith, after somehow escaping danger, was relieved, but instantly became cautious of the surroundings and confirmed their safety. Thinking, 'It seems as though there are no reinforcements', he regained his composure.

「Is anybody hurt?」

「W, we're fine……..」

None of them were injured. Sakrith was relieved at that, but that too was thanks to Harold's instant judgment and finding the clue to solve the situation. If, for example, were he to be in command, would they have gotten through it in such a fast yet accurate manner, and also without anyone being injured?

He couldn't help but think that it would have been difficult. At the very least, he wouldn't have been able to avoid Shido getting fatally injured. It was as Harold had said.

『If you don't feel anything from it, then you bastards have lost quite your edge』

In spite of being warned, not stopping Shido from approaching it unprepared, was without a doubt his fault since he was the current leader of this squad. He had almost let a person die right in front of him. Sakrith bowed towards Harold.

「Thank you, Stokes-kun. And forgive me. The cause of this crisis was my judgmental error」

「Don’t count something of this level as a crisis. But don’t make the same mistake again」

With this, it was unknown as to who the superior actually was. But still, Sakrith engraved those words in his mind, and gave a reply showing his resolution.

「I’ll bear it in mind. For sure」

◇

Sakrith’s gratitude hadn’t reach Harold’s ears. He was shaken to such an extent that he could do nothing other than reply mechanically. Looking at it from a distance, he was suspecting that it might be possible, but when he understood that they were the real thing, Harold’s frank mental state was「Why is this here!?」.

Dark red mist, its official name in the original work was Eerie Cloud. It was an enemy on whom physical attacks were ineffective and which could only be damaged by a randomly predetermined magic. There was no need to give a special mention of its offensive ability or stamina or resilience, but the troublesome point was that it was impossible to defend against Eerie Cloud’s attacks. There was no way other than to somehow evade them and hit them with magic.

Due to that, he fought against them while deducing in front of Cody and the others. In the game, there was an item called『Search Glass』that could confirm an enemy’s stamina and weakness, but for some reason, it didn’t exist in this world. He had thrown away his thinking about how each and everything was the same as in the game a long time ago, and the non-existence of Search Glass was a huge aid to that.

But what was important wasn’t that. Eerie Cloud was a monster that had a deep relation to the progression of the story, and originally it was a monster that appeared near the middle to final stages of the game. More clearly, their appearance was proof that the Last Boss, Eustace’s plan called Earth Encroachment was progressing steadily.

That which should have appeared 5 years from the start of the game had appeared at this stage. No matter how he thought about it, it was too fast. There was a possibility that in the produced game, they hadn’t appeared until the story had progressed to a certain point and had actually existed from the start. But if he were to assume the worst, then it could be thought that Eustace's plan had sped up compared to the game. If that were the case, then the original work's events might accelerate, and it might develop into a direction unknown to Harold.

Not each and everything was the same as the game. In spite of thinking that, why had he been so conceited as to think that the story would progress like in the game. The promulgation of the medicine in the Sumeragi territory and his own enlistment in the chivalric order. If said, even those were ahead of the original work. It was Harold's fatal mistake to have taken the speeding up of the original story lightly.

(Wait, wait, calm down. It isn't sure that that is the case……..)

He quietly adjusted his breathing and somehow maintained his calm. The thought just now was only assuming the worst case. The story might not necessarily have sped up. But there was a need to confirm it.

Eustace Freund.
Outwardly, he was a scientist who was praised as a genius. But his true nature was that of one who would fine in even destroying the world for his own ambitions, a lunatic. And he was also the perpetrator who had guided the original work's Harold to his death.

If Harold wanted to follow the story, then making contact with him was unavoidable, but Eustace was such a dangerous existence that he was considering what he could do to avoid him. If he himself didn't approach the other party, he wouldn't be able to gain information. Even for avoiding a development like-being too late by the time he realized it, he had to take the risk.

And so, with a new and extra-large anxiety factor budding up, Harold's final examination came to an end.

Episode 36

After finishing the examination and returning to the Royal Capital, Harold continued living busy days like before, working on the miscellaneous tasks and training, while waiting to be informed of the results and also racking his brains on how to get in contact with Justus. Justus's laboratory existed within the Royal Capital and in the game he had also come to the Royal Castle. If he thought of making contact, then he could do so.

But if the condition of not making him vigilant was added, then the difficulty level skyrocketed. But Justus's plan was a covert one and an absolute secret, and even if he were to include someone in the process to use them, he must have done the core part of it alone. More than anything, Harold had a complete grasp of this plan which was supposed to be an absolute secret. There was the danger of him seeing through that truth from Harold's behavior since he was a genius. And if that happened, he might use any and all means to seal Harold's mouth.

「Ha…….」

Then he might as well take him by surprise and arrest him, but again the risk was high. The main concern was the degree of completion of Earth Encroachment. Even if it was possible to arrest Justus, if the Earth Encroachment plan had progressed, then at the current stage the only one who might be able to stop it was the person himself.

「…….rold」

But Justus himself stopping the plan was absolutely unlikely to happen. Even if he had to throw away his own life, Justus would try to fulfill his desire. On top of that, if he were to awaken "that power", then it was unthinkable for him to be able to defeat him alone. If it went wrong, then even before Ryner's party took any action, the continent would fall.

In the first place, there was not enough evidence to arrest Justus. Even if he were to frankly give the whole picture of the plan to Vincent and the others, it wasn't difficult to imagine that they wouldn't pay any proper attention to it since it was too crazy. Who would believe some nonsense like Justus turning the world into a vessel to fulfill his desire to revive the dead.

「Harol–」

「Shut up」

He interrupted the repeated calls for him that had been coming from a while ago. With his name being called so persistently, there were limits to ignoring it. Stopping the arm that had been swinging the sword, he reluctantly turned towards the owner of the voice, Shido.

「What, you noticed, huh」

As though it was unexpected, Shido said that. Unfortunately, since he was practicing in a place where not a single person was around, he could immediately know if someone came. A dim place under the shadows of a thicket and a dilapidated building that seemed to have been a stable, it was the best spot to be alone. As to why he was practicing in such a place, it was because recently, he had started to get into quarrels even in the training grounds. They must have thought of tormenting him overtly in the name of practice. He had judged that in the worst case, even if he got into a quarrel here, they wouldn't be a bother to the surroundings.

「Isn't that obvious? I was just ignoring you」

「Isn't that worse?」

Really, that was exactly right. That said, since this mouth couldn't even gloss things over, he couldn't help but give up. Harold ignored Shido's comeback and continued the conversation.

「So, what do you want?」

Being shown interest, Shido suddenly bowed vigorously. It was a deep bow with his torso bent in a right angle. Towards Harold, who was inwardly bewildered at this sudden action, Shido made a request.

「Please train us!」

Harold lost his words for a bit. Sure Shido still couldn't be called first-rate, but still he had endured harsh training for a knight for 3 years and had improved his strength. And he had requested Harold, who was a newbie and moreover 6 years younger than himself. It was quite unexpected to the one who had been requested.

「You’re being an eyesore, raise your head. To begin with, who are you indicating by saying “us”?」

「Me, Robin and Aileen」

As expected, the request seemed to be from the usual trio. Listening to that, Harold sighed without even trying to conceal it. The feelings that were in it was “these guys too, huh”.

「Where did those 2 go?」

「They’re in the middle of patrolling the city. That’s why, only I have come to request this of you, but all of us agree」

Being requested like this to train them, he couldn’t help but be perplexed. Because most probably, there was no technique that Harold could teach them. It went without saying that Shido and the other 2 had a deeper understanding of the basics for the members of the chivalric order, and being relied on to such an extent, he could only be baffled. He was just trying to reproduce movements from the game without having any reliable basis for techniques, and in that condition what could he possibly teach.

And those were his true thoughts. But it wasn’t as though there were no merits in working out a way to increase their strength. There was a possibility of the 3 of them, Shido, Robinson and Aileen, losing their lives in the battle 2 years later. And Harold still hadn’t decided whether to save them, resolving himself for the destruction of the original work, or not. In the first place, he didn’t even know whether it was an event where he could do something to save them.

It would already be more than a month since meeting the 3 of them. There had been many chances for them to deepen their friendship, and if possible he didn’t want them to die. For it to also not become a situation where when he made the resolve to save them, it was already too late, it shouldn’t become useless if he were to strengthen them.

「……… Alright then. Tomorrow, bring the other 2 also here」

「Okay, thanks!」

After worrying for a bit, Harold decided to accept. No matter how it went in the future, it should be helpful in dealing with the situation. And he also had another purpose. Even if he used them, it wouldn't a problem.

The next day after giving a reply smeared with self-interest. In that desolate and gloomy space, 8 people, quite a number, were gathered. They were Shido's group of 3 and the 5 members of the 94th term 7th squad including Harold. The mood had become awkward because Shido's and Isaac's groups weren't acquainted, but Harold ignored that and started speaking.

「Then, let's start」

Without any preface or explanation, all of a sudden, those words came out. To that, the other seven each exchanged glances and became baffled.

「You say start, but first what should we do?」

「Draw your sword. All of you simultaneously come at me」

「Haa!? No matter what, that's underestimating us too much!」

The owner of the voice was the only female, Aileen. Though it was a queer unfeminine voice. Although he could understand that feeling of reflexively reacting like that, his mouth wouldn't come along in explaining each and every reason. And above all, to make them understand various things, it would be faster to actually fight them at least once.

「Don't talk back」

He didn't know what kind of change occurred, but his irritation at not being able to explain came out as wrath. Thereupon, everyone's face's instantly became pale. 'I'm so scary that just by threatening them a little, this happens, huh. Even for me, I feel doubtful', thought Harold. If that was the case, he could understand why people usually didn't approach him. The person was troublesome enough since he quarrels with his seniors, and if such a person were to give off an intimidating air, then it was natural for normal people to avoid him.

「Small fries should act like small fries and attack in a group. I'll teach you that even if you do so, I'm an existence that you can't reach」

While reflecting upon his solitude, this time he provoked them. This 1 vs many situation was exactly what Harold desired. Until now, he had fought against multiple monsters alone, but he hadn't fought against multiple humans. For the future, he wanted to accumulate experience of fighting against a large number. Since at any rate, there was a possibility of him having to face-off against the protagonist party alone.

「I'm going to make use of you bastards as my stepping stones. If you want to become strong, then learn from fighting against me and try to steal my techniques. Well, I think that's impossible though」

As an insurance, he also ridiculed them.

「……… Bring it on!」

Shido glared at Harold as though wanting to intimidate him and drew his sword. Following him, everybody took their battle stances. No matter what, all the people who were in the chivalric order were exceptional ones. Being made fun of to such an extent, there was nobody who wouldn't get mad.

「That's good. Struggle as much as possible to entertain me」

With those words as the start, a melee with 8 people jumbled together started.

◇

「–And that's it for the report」

Sakrith finished giving the report about this time's final examination held as an exception. Listening to it, the people who had been gathered here to decide the result of the examination would voice out their impressions. More than a few people must have been surprised at the report that had been given just now. Almost all of it was about Harold's high ability and the existence that seemed to be a monster they had met in the middle of their journey. There were even some of them who were skeptical about the contents of the report. In front of these people, Vincent started speaking.

「Each of you must have your own opinions, but as you've all heard, Harold might be young, but if it's only about strength, then he surpasses the company commander class. And we can also see that even in commanding abilities he is rare, so if we officially assign him to a squad early on and foster his actual combat experience, it should be possible to increase his strength more」[1]

「I understand Vincent-kun’s thoughts. Even I think that that training plan is logical」

The one gave that reply was the person who administered the composition of the corps of the chivalric order, Maelstrom[2]. When he narrowed his eyes, his age could be felt from how the wrinkles around his eyes deepened. It wasn’t a sharp gaze which could pierce through a person, but still, with a oppressive air, Maelstrom asked Vincent.

「But on the other hand, I feel that it is somewhat fast. With Harold’s nature that I’ve heard about, without a doubt he’ll raise waves in his relationship with his surroundings. He’s still young and it won’t be too late even if we take some time to teach him about those matters, right?」

「What you are saying is exactly right. And because I have the perfect squad for that kind of rectification, this time’s plan is the result」

「Let’s hear about it then」

「Yes. I think that Maelstrom-dono doesn’t know, but………」

Vincent explained the circumstances that were presently surrounding Harold. Harold had overwhelmed his seniors one after the other in a fight held in the name of enrollment examination. Due to that he was being resented by a part of them and kept being attacked persistently. And because of this, many people were keeping away from Harold, isolating him. In this condition, it might be difficult for him to get involved with his surroundings.

「………. I see. Quickly inserting Harold into a squad that bears no ill will towards him, huh. In that case, even if it’s only within the squad, he might able to build a relationship」

「Yes. And the one I’m suggesting, Cody, excels at understanding humans. Especially building relations with subordinates, there’s no other person who’s better than him. And moreover, Cody was the one who invited Harold, and he also seems to be acquainted with the members of his squad since he has been seen having friendly conversations with them」

He was exaggerating a bit. From what Shannon had said, it seemed as though

Shido would obstinately get involved with Harold, who was basically always frowning, and Robinson and Aileen would watch over them while being exasperated at times or while smiling wryly. But still, since Harold hadn't show any stony kind of behavior, it seemed as though he too had somewhat opened up.

「Nevertheless, it's sad. Although Harold's behavior is also at fault, to think that there were insolent people who would play dumb to their own short-comings even in the chivalric order」

「It is my lack of care. As soon as I identify those who attacked him, I'll hand out the proper punishment. And also, since there seem to be people who are instigating others to act against Harold, I'm in the middle of confirming it」

「Since you are taking action, I won't say anything more. And so, getting back to the topic, assigning him to a squad is to get him to accumulate experience, rectifying his personality and also for it to act as an obstruction to the animosity shown towards him from the surroundings, right?」

「Yes. I'm saying this even though knowing it isn't admirable, but I don't mind if you think of it as a measure to avoid destroying Harold's ability」

To his words, everybody in that place became unsettled. The him who was famous for being just and upright in regards to his duties and who would be an impartial judge towards anybody, was openly saying that Harold should be given special treatment. And they understood. That Harold was an existence who possessed such extraordinary talent that it was enough to even make Vincent back him.

「……… He has so much talent that it has even charmed Vincent-kun, huh. Then I won't say anything anymore. Then, I approve of him officially enlisting into the squad」

「Thank you for understanding」

There was nobody who objected Maelstrom's decision. Harold joining Cody's squad had been officially decided. Until now, it had all gone according to Vincent's plan, but at the last moment an unexpected interruption came.

With a snap, the door to the conference room opened. Without even any kind of acknowledgment and with just a「Pardon me」, the one who appeared was a middle-aged man with a protruding belly.

「You all, sorry for being so sudden. But it seems like a somewhat hopeful newbie has joined, huh」

「Right, thankfully. By the way, what kind of business does Harrison-dono have?」

「Since I heard that that kid's treatment is being decided, I was curious. I didn't mean to hinder it, but since I had a helpful suggestion right when required, I just unconsciously intruded」

While patting his stomach, Harrison, who had sat in a vacant seat without even excusing himself, laughed as though something pleasant was happening. It was an extremely haughty attitude.

「Can we receive a concrete explanation?」

「It's a kind of patrol duty. It isn't like there's an emergency or that there's high risk, but the place is far. He'll have to go to the national border」

「That is again quite difficult」

「But if it's around the border, there should be people who are normally assigned to patrol duty though, right?」

Since only the headquarters at the Royal Capital couldn't quickly solve all situations, there were a few branches of the chivalric order established within the Kingdom. It was arranged so that when there was an emergency, they would all unite and take actions, but if the branches themselves could take care of a situation, normally they would solve it on their own and would later on send a report to the headquarters. Patrolling duties near the national border was a general duty of the branch.

「A notification that they want reinforcements has come. Recently, it seems as though the Beltiz[3] forest is turbulent so they want to make a serious investigation, but it seems like they don't have enough personnel」

「I didn't receive such a report though……?」

「What, is that true? There must have been some kind of mistake」

Folding his arms, Harrison tilted his head. Although he looked barefaced, more than that, there was a word that couldn't be ignored in what Harrison had said.

「By the way, if you're talking about the Beltiz forest, it's the region where the Star Reader《Stellar》tribe live. It won't be easy to enter」

Star Reader (Stellar) tribe. Also called as the people of the stars, they were the continent's oldest race. Even the people of the stars, who had been ruling the whole continent in the past, after exhausting their prosperity had their population reduced due to the many conflicts over power over a long period of time. The negligible amount of descendants who had survived until now were living as a small and closed-off community. They were a race which had many mysteries.

Maybe because of that history, their hate towards other races' interference was extreme. If the chivalric order were to investigate the Beltiz forest, they would oppose quite strongly. If they tried to forcibly push through, there was a danger that it might even develop into battle. Towards Maelstrom's worried question, once again Harrison answered looking triumphant while shaking his belly.

「We're currently in the middle of negotiations. Well, it isn't as though we will intrude into their livelihood sphere, so if we just tell them beforehand, there will be no problem. Coming to the real issue, I thought about having that newbie accompany them on this patrolling mission」

「…….. The reason is?」

「No matter how outstanding he is, won't the risk be too much if we suddenly throw him into actual combat? As I've explained, this time's patrolling mission's risk is low. If it becomes a long term investigation, he'll have more time to connect with the other members, and isn't it the perfect mission for participating in for the first time?」

Certainly, Harrison's words made sense. Even Vincent hadn't thought of putting Harold in a mission that required combat as his first one. But it was true that he wanted to send him out on missions from early on. Seeing through Vincent's plan, Harrison had called this suggestion as "help arriving at the right time".

What he was worried about was as to why Harrison was being so cooperative. His official post was the supervision head, which was to bring together the chivalric order and the national army. In other words he was the person in control of this Kingdom's military.

However, the chivalric order and the army were unable to cooperate. The main reason was because of the awareness that the chivalric order was above the army that was spread among the public. Originally, there was no above or below with the chivalric order and the army, and as organizations they were equal. Then as to why that kind of awareness had spread about was because of the huge difference in the chance to play an active role.

The chivalric order would actively move out with regards to various situations, but because the army was passive since their main mission was defense, large-scale missions were scarce for them. The chivalric order which had many flashy activities was a flourishing job while the army was simple-this image had taken root. In reality, the number of people who aimed for the chivalric order but entered the army because of failing the examination was extremely high. They too perceived that the chivalric order was above the army.

While being exposed to that tendency, Harrison had a history of climbing up to the supervision head while he had been affiliated to the army. Even from the time he was affiliated to the army, he had been competitive with the chivalric order regarding each and every matter that had come up. He had even narrated, "I turned the resentment of not being able to enroll into the chivalric order into power and rose up in the world". Although only he himself knew what his true motives were, taking his behavior until now into account, it could be seen that he was making the chivalric order out to be his enemy at each and every turn.

It wasn't a good way of putting it, but he was suspicious. When he was being cooperative to this extent, more than a few doubts rose up in Vincent's head. That was how much unlike Harrison it was.

「……… You're right. I'll take into consideration」

He was unable to read Harrison's aim, but since he didn't have any definite reason to refuse the proposal, for now, Vincent gave that reply. Hearing that, leaving behind「More than anything else, I was able to help you all」, Harrison left the conference room. And a few days later, Harold’s name was there in the list of members that would participate in that patrolling mission.

TL-

1. Vincent is speaking to his superiors so he is being very respectful
2. Maelstrom – ミルストラム (Mirusutoramu)
3. Beltiz – ベルティス (Berutisu)

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